THE RELIGION OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

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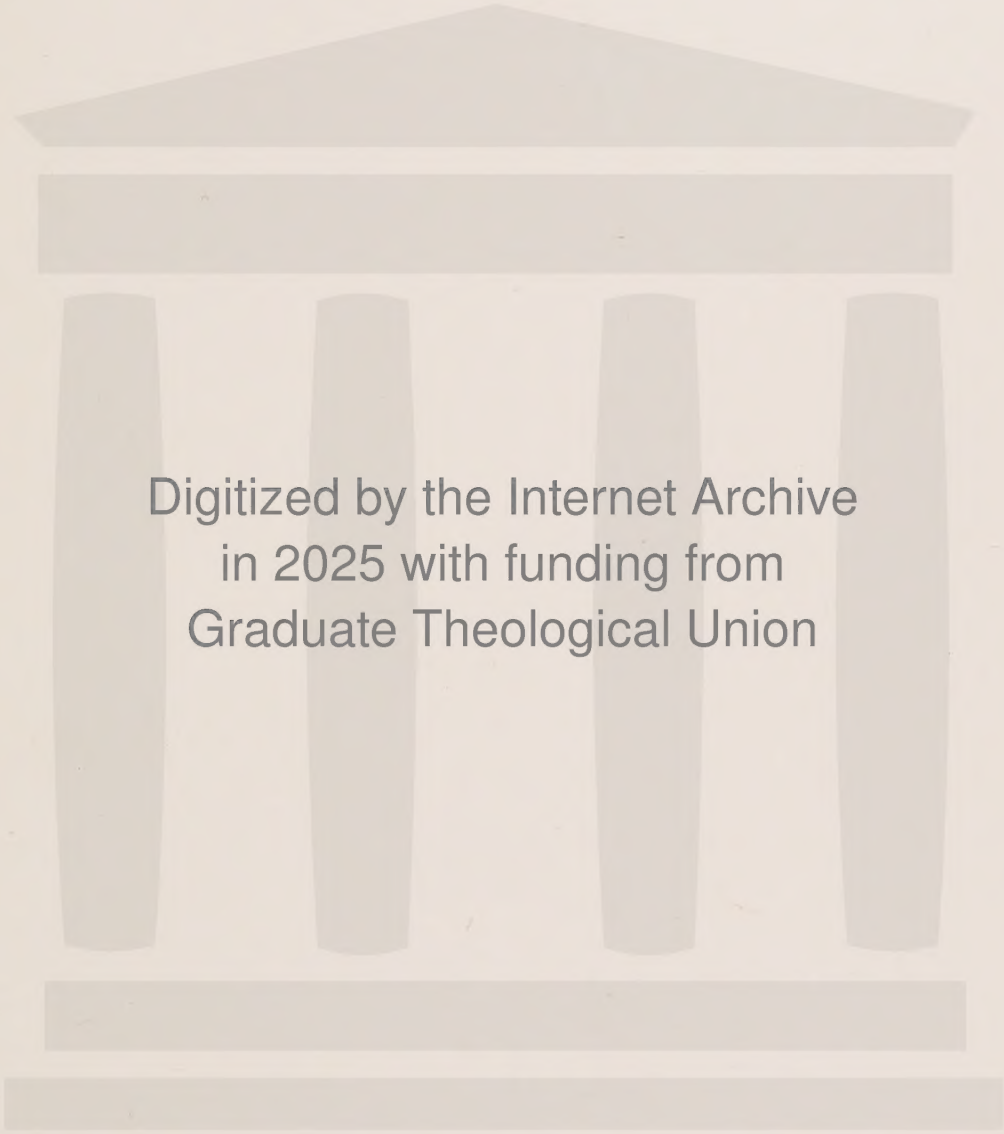
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THE DOCTRINE OF SPIRIT BAPTISM

by

John Tenney Boswell

A.B., Washington and Lee University, 1938

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

BACHELOR OF DIVINITY

in the

Department of American Church History
GRADUATE DIVINITY SCHOOL OF THE PACIFIC

Berkeley, California

May, 1945

Approved:

Instructor

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I

CLERICAL ERRORS ABOUT GEORGE WASHINGTON

CHAPTER I

CLERICAL ERRORS ABOUT GEORGE WASHINGTON

So many writers have exhumed George Washington's literary remains that the soul of this good man must look askance at any fresh attempt. His life has been a popular subject ever since the merry parson, Mason Locke Weems, demonstrated its literary value and shamelessly exploited it. The process has continued with no sign of a letup right down to the present.[1] Thus in essaying to add my own slender contribution to the monumental pile already accumulated in the libraries I take up my pen, as the ancients said, with no little trepidation.

There is not much that could be said of Washington that hasn't already been said by men far abler and wiser than I. However, it does seem that there is no very successful attempt to understand Washington's religious views, and to present them. He has been variously placed as an orthodox Christian, a devout Episcopalian, a Deist, and even as

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[1] A new edition of selections from George Washington's writings edited by Philip S. Foner has just been announced by International Publishers (May, 1945).

an "atheist."[2]

The average secular historian is apt to dismiss Washington's religious interests with a brief account of his loyalty to the Episcopal Church and the conclusion that in spite of this, he, with other Revolutionary leaders, was a Deist. This type of treatment of Washington's undoubted religious nature is as formal and unreal as some of Washington's own official references to the Deity.

On the other hand there have been some Churchmen, clergy and other religiously disposed persons who, starting with the premise that George Washington, because of his loyalty to the Episcopal Church, was indeed an orthodox Christian have sought to prove it by fair means--or otherwise. They deal in half-truths taken from Washington's writings, romantic traditions from second, third, and even fourth hand sources; and they utterly ignore much evidence that is to be found in Washington's own writings that would disprove their contentions.

Of course there are some who make an honest attempt to give Washington his due and to treat his religious views without bias or prejudice, and to them I am indebted. But generally speaking, there is no treatment sufficiently elaborate to rule out the need for yet another, which in this

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[2] See below, p. 103.

thesis, I propose to undertake.

It seems to me there are certain obvious conclusions which, for some reason or other, have not yet been made on the religion of George Washington. I will endeavor to draw them.

Since any thesis is supposed to be an original contribution in the field, it is conceivable that the writer is somewhat in the position of a pioneer. And, as you know, one of the first tasks of the pioneers of our early American history was to clear away certain timber. So, in preparing to raise my structure, I, too, find it necessary to clear away certain obstructing timber. I refer to various works which have presented Washington in a false light as far as his religious interests are concerned.

The first is that of the "merry parson" Mason Locke Weems, a some time ordained priest in the Established Church of England. I proceed with no hesitation or fear of treating "the cloth" roughly, for Weems himself appears to have had very little respect for it, and was not above exploiting it for his personal profit.

Van Wyck Brooks quotes Parson Weems--the Reverend Mason Locke Weems--as writing to Matthew Carey, the Philadelphia publisher: "Washington, you know, is gone! Millions are gaping to read something about him. I am nearly primed and cocked for 'em. Six months ago I set myself to collect

anecdotes about him. You know I live conveniently for that work."[3] This was in 1800, the year that saw the publication of the first edition of his Life of George Washington. Within five years it had gone through four more editions. And in 1806 it was revised and elaborated from an 80 page pamphlet to a 250 page volume[4] that "ran through seventy editions before its popularity failed."[5]

Most of Washington's biographers and historians are content either to impatiently brush Weems aside as a garrulous liar, or to ignore him altogether. This, I think, is a basic error. Admitting that Weems is an out-and-out liar, that most of his fables about Washington are purely fictional, and that he has seriously misrepresented himself on the title page of his biography as "Formerly Rector of Mount Vernon Parish,"[6] still, his work has been an amazingly potent influence in the tradition that has descended concerning Washington.

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3 Van Wyck Brooks, The World of Washington Irving (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1944), p. 1.

4 Elfrieda McCauley, "The Irrepressible Parson Weems," The Living Church (February 18, 1945), p. 18.

5 Nathaniel Wright Stephenson, and Waldo Hilary Dunn, George Washington (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), vol. I, p. 426.

6 Mason Locke Weems, The Life of George Washington (Philadelphia: R. Cochran, 1808).

The late Henry Cabot Lodge, who has left a scholarly two volume biography of Washington, was discerning enough to recognize Weems's nuisance value for what it was and has been, and dispose of it with the serious treatment it deserves.

He lays the blame for the popular myth that Washington was a "faultless prig" directly upon Weems's shoulders, pointing out that the itinerant parson "wrote with Dr. Beattie's life of his son before him as a model."[7] From this source Lodge claims that Weems lifted bodily the tale about Washington's father's planting seeds in such a manner that when they came up they formed George's initials, and then explaining that he had done it to illustrate and endow his son with a respect for the work of God.[8]

Naturally Weems, as everyone else, had abundant material on Washington's public life at his command, but in describing the first President's boyhood and home life he was "thrown on his own resources" and the result has been unfortunate for so intrinsically human and great a man as Washington actually was.

Weems's popular biography caught the nation's imagination and spread like wildfire, gradually working up from

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[7] Henry Cabot Lodge, George Washington (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1889), vol. I, p. 10.

[8] Ibid., vol. I, p. 43.

the farmers and pioneers for whom it was intended, to the attention of historians, and so became a part of the generally accepted Washington tradition.

Weems may have preached to a few congregations "which numbered Washington among its members," as Lodge points out, but there is no foundation whatsoever for his claim to be the former "Rector of Mount Vernon Parish." There was never any such parish! The nearest thing to it was Truro parish "in which was a church indifferently called Pohick or Mount Vernon Church" and of which Washington was a vestryman until 1765.[9]

And as for Weems's personal acquaintance with Washington, the only time he is mentioned in the latter's diaries is this brief note of Saturday March 3, 1787: "The Revd. Mr. Weems and yg. Doctr. Craik who came here yesterday in the afternoon left this morning for Port Tobo. Doctr. Stuart came here in the evening."[10]

Apparently Weems's influence was none too effective, for it is to be noted that Washington's diary reveals that he did not attend church the following day.

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[9] Lodge, op. cit., p. 42.

[10] George Washington, The Diaries of George Washington (edited by John C. Fitzpatrick; New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925). Vol. III, p. 174.

So much for the Reverend Mr. Weems. He is generally discredited, but his influence, like that of the spurious "Isadorean Decretals" and the "Donation of Constantine," lives on long after the source has been proved unreliable.

We find so serious a writer as William J. Johnson in his book George Washington the Christian quoting Weems in the latter's report of Washington's death: "Feeling that the silver cord of life is loosing and that his spirit is ready to quit her old companion, the body, he extends himself on his bed--closes his eyes for the last time with his own hands--folds his arms decently on his breast, then breathing out, 'Father of mercies, take me to thyself,' he falls asleep."[11]

This is just the sort of romantic twaddle that has clouded our vision of the real Washington. No one but a ham actor would be guilty of such a "stagey" departure. And Washington was anything but that. What he actually did say (according to Dr. Fitzpatrick, who has edited Washington's diaries and has probably done more research in this field than any other scholar) was: "I felt from the first the disorder would prove fatal....but I am not afraid to go."[12]

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[11] William J. Johnson, George Washington the Christian (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1919), p. 234.

[12] Honor to George Washington and Reading About George Washington. Pamphlets 1 to 16 Complete, edited by Albert Bushnell Hart (Washington, D.C.: George Washington Bicentennial Commission, 1932), Pamphlet 5, p. 51.

Johnson is at pains in his book to prove a point which will not bear too close a scrutiny, namely, that Washington was a sound Episcopalian and Christian. His is an awkward attempt spotted with half truths, quotations lifted out of context, and romantic statements such as that found in his preface: "It is one hundred eighty-seven years since Washington was born in a humble Virginia pioneer's cabin."[13] It is common knowledge that Washington's father, Augustine Washington, was a rich man with extensive iron mine and plantation interests. At another point he quotes President Madison as saying, "Washington was constant in the observance of worship, according to the received forms of the Episcopal Church."[14] To the innocent reader that certainly looks like real proof from a reliable source. But let us examine the whole quotation from which this sentence was lifted.

Paul Leicester Ford takes this particular comment of Madison's into account in his own appraisal of Washington's religious beliefs. Madison wrote that he "did not suppose that Washington had ever attended to the arguments for Christianity, and for the different systems of religion, or in fact that he had formed definite opinions on the

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13 Johnson, op. cit., p. 14.

14 Ibid., p. 257.

subject. But he took these things as he found them existing and was constant in his observance of the worship according to the received forms of the Episcopal Church, in which he was brought up."[15]

Obviously Johnson's report is only a half-truth, and as such is sufficient to throw doubt upon the veracity of his whole work. (I am reminded of a brief scene in a movie which I once saw. It was a racing picture, and the camera revealed, at one point, a distinguished-appearing man in a pitch helmet and white linens, nonchalantly lighting a cigarette and glancing through a racing form. He looked for all the world like a rich sportsman about to place a wager at the betting booths. Then the camera's focus was enlarged and the "rich sportsman" stood revealed as a member of the "white wing battalion" cleaning up the track after a race!)

As Fitzpatrick says in his full length biography of Washington,

> "It is not necessary to strain for effects in the true story of George Washington. Everything for which documentary proof does not exist may be discarded without regret [here he refers to the cherry tree, fiery colt and other similar Washington fables], for the proveable facts that remain support a life and character more than satisfactory to the most ardent admirer and more than sufficient to suppress the vain activ-

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[15] Paul Leicester Ford, George Washington (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1924), p. 83.

ities of the most captious critic."[16]

It seems to me that it is time the clergy came to an agreement on "what to say about Washington." In perpetrating the idea that he was a thoroughgoing Episcopalian and Christian we lay ourselves open to the serious charge of overlooking important evidence to the contrary, and straining for effects. Perhaps the real Washington may be an even more imposing figure from a religious standpoint, than the ardent churchgoing communicant of popular clerical fancy.

But to continue with our examination of the so-called "authorities" on Washington's religious nature: we come to Bishop Meade who has written a work of two volumes entitled Old Churches, Ministers and Families of Virginia.

Bishop Meade was fairly close to the source of much Washingtonia, writing as he did in 1833. But he too starts out with a prejudicial viewpoint, and simply tries to substantiate it, to refute, as he says, any belief that Washington had "fallen into the irreligion and skepticism of the age" and to show "proofs of his sincere belief in Christianity as a divine revelation."[17]

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16 John C. Fitzpatrick, George Washington Himself (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1933), p. 19.

17 Bishop Meade, Old Churches, Ministers and Families of Virginia (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1910), vol. II, p. 243.

He then quotes Washington, but nowhere does the latter acknowledge Christ by name. Meade speaks of Washington's "Strict observance of the Sabbath" and says that "his private diary shows it in various places."[18] As a matter of fact, Washington's "private diary" reveals that in three fairly representative years, 1760, 1768, and 1773, he attended church only sixteen, fourteen, and eight times respectively. And as for the reverence in which Meade claims Washington held the Sabbath, his diary shows that Washington "reserved Sunday for writing private letters, preparing his invoices, entertaining company, closing land purchases, selling crops, fox-hunting and collecting the rent."[19]

And speaking of fox-hunting, Bishop Meade, in denying that Washington was inordinately fond of, or even had time for fox-hunting, asks, "What do we find in his diary of dogs and kennels and the chase?"[20]

Let us see what we find! For May 3, 1768 we find this entry: "The hound bitch Mopsey brought 8 Puppys distinguished by the following names; viz, Tarter, Jupiter, Trueman and Tipler (being dogs) and Truelove, June, Dutchess and Lady, being the bitches--in all eight."[21]

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18 Bishop Meade, op. cit., p. 248.

19 Ford, op. cit., pp. 78-79.

20 Meade, op. cit., p. 250.

21 Washington, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 270-271.

Furthermore, his diaries show that whereas he attended church only twice in September, once in October, and once in November in the year 1768, he went fox-hunting four times in September, four in October, and nine times in November.[22]

Nor does the Bishop's next question fare any better in the diaries. The Bishop asks, "And as to his admiration of the theatre and his delighting in its ludicrous and indelicate exhibitions, does it seem probable that the grave, dignified Washington....should have found time for such entertainments?"[23]

Unfortunately it does seem probable that the "grave and dignified Washington" not only found time for such entertainments, but seemed to relish them. His diary for May, 1771 records that Washington "went to the play" in Williamsburg on the 2nd, 3rd, and 8th. And there are many other references in other years.

The good Bishop's contribution to the history of Washington is of slight and questionable value, but it bears the authority of a Bishop, and as such has undoubtedly influenced many readers. Especially in his "reasonable" deduction that Washington was a communicant from "the indication of

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22 Washington, op. cit., pp. 295-299.

23 Meade, op. cit., p. 251.

his youthful piety, his religious and ministerial offices at the head of his regiment, the active part taken in the concerns of the parish, his habits of devotion, his regular attendance at Church, his conscientious observance of the sabbath and his strict fasting on appointed days."[24] There is a wide difference between reasonable deduction and verifiable fact. And even where Meade introduces a letter from one Major Popham, of Washington's command, who says "I am as confident as a memory now laboring under the pressure of fourscore years and seven can make me, that the President had more than once--I believe I may say often--attended at the sacramental table, at which I had the privilege and happiness to kneel with him,"[25] it is of doubtful value.

This is one isolated piece of evidence, and in view of other evidence which I will submit later on, I fear the pressure of eighty-seven years was too great for Major Popham's memory.

And now that we have some of the romance properly catalogued, I hope, let's get on to the real man behind this pious mask. As I suggested above, Washington was fond of sport. In fact, it seems to me that a picture of Washington is a much better note to strike at the outset of this paper

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24 Meade, op. cit., pp. 254-255.

25 Ibid., vol. II, p. 490.

than the false ones of Weems, Meade, Johnson, et al.

Woodrow Wilson has left us a fine picture of George Washington the sportsman which I will quote in full.

> "Washington loved horses and dogs with the heartiest sportsman of them all. He had a great gusto for stalking deer with George Mason on the broad forested tracts around Gunston Hall, and liked often to take a gun or rod after lesser game when the days fell dull; but best of all he loved a horse's back, and the hard ride for hours together after the dogs and a crafty quarry. His own mounts could nowhere be bettered in Virginia. His hounds he bred 'so flew'd, so sanded, so matched in speed and habit, that they kept always tune and pace together in the field....' 'Twas first to the stables for him always in the morning, and then to the kennels." 26

Washington Irving, writing some sixty-seven years earlier, says, "Washington delighted in the chase....In the height of the season he would be out with the foxhounds two or three times a week, accompanied by his guests at Mount Vernon and the gentlemen of the neighborhood....On such occasions there would be a hunting dinner....at which convivial repasts Washington is said to have enjoyed himself with unwonted hilarity."[26a]

I have included this rather lively picture of Washington as a warning that it is my hope to make him live again, not to add a few pale flowers to his grave. So, with the clean, pungent scent of the "covert" in our nostrils, we may

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26 Woodrow Wilson, George Washington (New York: Harper & Bros., 1897), p. 110.

26a Washington Irving, The Life of George Washington (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company), p. 209.

visit the scene of Washington's boyhood and, in fact, most of his life, with a certain pleasant anticipation. I refer to that part of Virginia known as the "Old Dominion."

II

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S ENVIRONMENT

CHAPTER II

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S ENVIRONMENT

Anyone who has traveled through that section of Virginia that lies east of the Blue Ridges, knows that Nature smiled upon it from the first. Here are broad sweeping lawns, delightful old stone fences, rail fences, trim boxwood hedges, and graceful old trees. The turf is thick and green; the climate is mild. Should you call it home, you would scarce ever want to leave. Everywhere is a mellow, lovely rural atmosphere: the perfect setting for the country gentleman of the Old Dominion that Washington, throughout his life, never ceased to be.

In the days of his boyhood Virginia was a colony with few cities and towns, poor means of communication, except by river and corduroy roads, and practically no industries but farming. There were no schools worth mentioning (except the College of William and Mary), and the largest town was Norfolk with a population of some six or seven thousand. The total population of the state was about five hundred thousand.

The public inns have been described as execrable, and "only the ever-ready hospitality of the people made it

possible to get from place to place. The result was that the Virginians stayed at home, and sought and welcomed the rare stranger at their gates as if they were aware that they were entertaining angels."[27]

The dearth of educational facilities may be put down to lack of interest on the part of those who would naturally support them, the planters. They had little need of "book learning" to run a plantation, or raise horses. The planter was essentially an outdoors man. As Lodge puts it, "he thought little and read less." The women had even fewer educational opportunities than the men. For, after learning all the parson could teach them, they were through. They couldn't go to Europe or to the College of William and Mary. And in most cases they settled down to managing the home and looking out for the welfare of the slaves, working a lot harder than their menfolk.

The colony was ruled locally through the vestries, and as a whole through the House of Burgesses, which was made up principally of men from the planter class. They were far more interested in the politics of Europe than they were in religion, though they were fairly conscientious about their worship in the Established (Anglican) Church. They were first, and last, aristocrats, set apart by inflex-

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[27] Lodge, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 16-20.

ible distinctions of color, race, and heredity. They were a strong race and a proud race.[28] And, though not so widely descended from the Cavaliers of the Old Country as is popularly supposed,[29] still they were the "Cavaliers" of the New World, "as proud as the proudest Austrian with his endless quarterings, as sturdy and vigorous as an English yeoman.... and jealous....of his rights and privileges."[30]

Into such a land and of such a stock was George Washington born on February 11, 1732 (old style calendar). The old family Bible carries the record in his father's handwriting: "George William, son to Augustine Washington, and Mary, his wife, was born the eleventh day of February, 1731-2, about ten in the morning, and was baptized the 3rd April following, Mr. Bromley Whiting, and Captain Christopher Brooks godfathers, and Mrs. Mildred Gregory godmother."[31]

Probably the best jumping-off place for the start of an examination of Washington's religious development is

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[28] Lodge, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 23-28.

[29] Thomas C. Hall, in his book, The Religious Background of American Culture (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1930), pp. 113-114, says: "....exactly the same class settled in Virginia and Maryland as settled in Massachusetts and Connecticut. The 'Cavalier' Virginia is a myth....The great mass of the population [in Virginia] was of lower-class origin."

[30] Lodge, op. cit., vol. I, p. 28.

[31] Johnson, op. cit., p. 18.

his Rules of Life, which have been credited to various sources and offered as proof of his early piety. Moncure D. Conway, in his discussion of them (George Washington's Rules of Civility, 1890) as quoted by Johnson, writes: "Scarcely one rule is there that does not involve self-restraint, modesty, habitual consideration for others, and, to a large extent, living for others."[32]

Actually these Rules are simply a set of axioms on decency and manners interspersed with guide lines for a member of the aristocratic and governing class.[33] Stephenson and Dunn trace them to three sources: the first, "a treatise on manners set down by French Jesuits in the 16th century, translated into Latin and published early in the 17th century, and done into English by Francis Hawkins with the title Youth's Behavior, or Decencie in Conversation Amongst Men about 100 years before Washington was born"; the second, Contemplations Moral and Divine, by Sir Matthew Hale, the book belonging to Augustine Washington's first wife and "in which Mary Washington wrote her name immediately after her marriage"; and the third, "Some Virginia dominie, or possibly Mary Washington herself."[34]

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32 Johnson, op. cit., p. 20.

33 Stephenson and Dunn, op. cit., p. 31.

34 Ibid.

George Washington copied these Rules in his own handwriting when he was about thirteen years old. Considering that there are 110 of them, this is worthy of note. And there is a great deal of justice in the claim that they were influential in forming the young Washington's character. Especially may this be said of the last rule, "Labor to keep alive in your Breast that little Spark of Celestial fire called conscience."[35] But on the whole they do not represent a very high stage of cultural development.

Evidence seems to point to the fact that Washington's mother was a religious woman. George's half-brother Lawrence, with whom he went to live after his father's death in 1743, found Mary Washington, according to one authority, "illiterate, untidy and querulous, with a passion for reading religious tracts, and he suspected her of smoking a pipe."[36]

There is a tradition, which Dr. Fitzpatrick seems half inclined to accept, which holds that it was Mary Washington's custom to rise at dawn and spend the first hour of the day in contemplation in preparation for the family worship, conduct of which fell upon George's shoulders when he

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35 Stephenson and Dunn, op. cit., p. 32.

36 Shelby Little, George Washington (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1929), p. 2.

was only eleven. These duties called for grace at the table and prayers at night and morning. Thus was he early impressed with his responsibilities to God.[37]

While there is little documentary evidence to prove that Washington was of a religious turn of mind as a young man,[38] it does seem safe to accept the tradition that he grew up in an atmosphere of piety and strict religious observance. One book in his mother's library, at least, reveals that her interest was in religious reading. This book, Sir Matthew Hale's Contemplations Moral and Divine, had belonged to Augustine Washington's first wife, and seems to have been well thumbed before Mary Washington found it and wrote her name in it.[39] If George was sufficiently acquainted with it to use it in drawing up his list of Rules, it must have held an important place in the family's affections. And it may well have been one of the sources from which Lawrence Washington drew his own interest in religion.[40] George admired and liked his half-brother, and may have unconsciously imitated him in his

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37 Honor to Washington, p. 166.

38 Fitzpatrick, op. cit., p. 130.

39 See above, p. 20.

40 Honor to Washington, p. 51.

early thinking.

The safest conclusion to draw is that George Washington probably dwelt no more on religion in his thoughts than any other normal and healthy lad of his age. Certainly, experience shows us that the more active and physical-minded a boy is, the less time he is likely to devote to religious contemplation. He just doesn't have it to give. And there is little doubt that Washington was a man of uncommon athletic attainments. He was large, standing six feet three inches when full grown, and Washington Irving has said that he was "a bold rider and an admirable horseman."[41]

His first serious thinking about God probably occurred in his twenty-third year when he counted the bullet holes in his coat after the Braddock fiasco and frankly acknowledged that some power higher than man must have saved him.[42] He was never reluctant to acknowledge assistance from God, or man.

Afterwards, as Commander-in-Chief of the Colonial armies during the Revolution, he was to issue many orders pertaining to worship. And we find as early as 1756, and before the defeat, that Washington, serving under Braddock,

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[41] Irving, op. cit., p. 209.

[42] Honor to Washington, p. 51.

gave the following order of the day for Saturday, September 18: "The men....to be marched by the sergeants of the respective companies to the Fort, there to remain until prayers are over." Evidently this order was not too popular, for he repeated it on the following Saturday, and asked the officers to be responsible for the men's attendance at Divine Service. The result was that "every Sunday thereafter the men were marched to prayers, and in the middle of November the Sunday Service was made a standing order for the future."[43]

In the same year, 1756, he seems to have signed the Oath of Conformity to the Established Church.[44]

Three years later, on January 6, 1759, he married Martha Dandridge Custis, wealthy widow of Daniel Parke Custis, whom he had met in 1758. And here it may be observed, in support of Washington's moral character, that there is no evidence of his supposed love-affair with Sally Cary Fairfax, wife of his friend George William Fairfax.[45]

Naturally there had been little time for churchgoing during the arduous years in the Virginia Militia. We do not even know whether he attended Divine Services with

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43 Honor to Washington, pp. 46-47.

44 Fitzpatrick, op. cit., p. 130.

45 Honor to Washington, p. 163.

the men. But soon after marriage and taking up residence at Mount Vernon, Washington "was elected vestryman in the two parishes of Truro and Fairfax, and from that election he was quite active in Church affairs."[46]

He was first elected to the vestry of Truro Parish where Pohick Church was located. And here, as his diary reveals, he attended services until the vestry voted against private pews, when he transferred his membership to Christ Church at Alexandria, in Fairfax Parish, and paid the high price of 36 pounds sterling for a pew there.

Washington had been sufficiently interested in the Pohick Church to draw up the plans for its new building and subscribed to the cost.[47]

It is interesting to note that his church attendance improved greatly after his marriage. And it was always better during the political crises, and the periods of national stress and strain, while during his peaceful, happy years as the Squire of Mount Vernon his attendance record leaves much to be desired. Perhaps it would shed more light

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46 Ford, op. cit., pp. 76-77. "The old vestry book of Pohick Church has this entry: 'At a Vestry held for Truro Parish, October 25, 1762, ordered, that George Washington, Esq. be chosen and appointed one of the Vestry-men of this Parish, in the room of William Peake, Gent. deceased.'" Johnson, op. cit., p. 49.

47 Ford, op. cit., p. 77.

on his relations with the Church, if we take a year of Sundays, and show how Washington spent them.

The year 1773 was one in which the clouds of war were perceptible on the horizon. It was fourteen years after Washington had settled down at Mount Vernon with his bride, Martha, and her two children, John Parke and Martha; a year in which Washington might be expected to feel the "stress and strain" of the approaching trouble with England. Here are his entries: [Italics supplied by the present writer]

January - Sunday, 3rd--"In the Afternoon Mr Ben Dulany came here; the other Gentlemen continued all day here."

Sunday, 10th--"At home all day. Mr. Geo. Digges, Messers. David and Chas. Stewart, Mr. Danl. Carrol Junr., and Mr. Richmond, dind and lodged here."

Sunday, 17th--At home all day alone. Mrs. Barnes went up to Alexandria."

Sunday, 24th--"At home all day alone."

February- Sunday, 7th--"At home all day alone."

Sunday, 14th--"At home all day--alone."

Sunday, 21st--"At home all day. Mr. Hoops and a Mr. Warton calld here, but would not stay [to] dinner, taking a Cut before it."

Sunday, 28th--"At home all day. About noon Mr. Francis Willis, Mr. Warnr. Washington, and my Brother Saml. came here."

March - Sunday, 7th--"Dind at the Governor's and spent the evening at Mrs. Campbell's."

Sunday, 14th--"Set off about 10 o'clock. Dind at King William Court and lodged at Todd's Bridge."

Sunday, 21st--"At home all day alone."

Sunday, 28th--"Went with Mr. & Mrs. Digges, 7ca., to dine with Mr. Benj. Dulany at Mrs. French's. Returnd. again in the afternoon.

April - Sunday, 4th--"Mrs. Fairfax and Polly Brazier dind here, as did Majr. Wagener. The latter stayd all Night. Mr. Jno Baylor came in the afternoon."

April - Sunday, 11th--"Went to Pohick Church and Mrs. Washington and Mrs. Custis, and returned to Dinner."

Sunday, 18th--"Reachd Home to Dinner after passing through Piscataway Town."

Sunday, 25th--"At home all day with the above company."

May- Sunday, 2nd--"Went to Belvoir and Dind. Returned in the afternoon."

Sunday, 9th--"At home all day, Messrs. Ramsay, Rumney and Herbert Dind here; the last of whom went away, the others stayd all Night."

Sunday, 16th--"Breakfasted at Chester and Dined at Govr. Penn's in Philadelphia."

Sunday, 23rd--"Set out for New York with Lord Sterling, Majr. Bayard and Mr. Custis, After breakfasting with Gvr. Penn. Dined with Govr. Franklin at Burlington and lodged at Trenton."

Sunday, 30th--"Dined with Genl. Gage and Spent evening in my own room writing."

June - Sunday, 6th--"Breakfasted at Slade's, 10 miles from Sutton's, and dind. and lodged at Baltimore Town."

Sunday, 13th--"Went up with Miss Reed, etca., to Alex. Church. Returnd to dinner with Mr. Willis. Doct. Rumney w[en]t away.

Sunday, 20th--"Colo. Fairfax and Lady, as also Mr. Massey dined here, Patcy Custis being buried. The first went away, Mr. Massey stayd."

Sunday,27th--"The two Miss Calverts went up to Church. Mr. Calvert came over to dinner and stayd all night, as did Mr. Tilgman from Alexa."

July - Sunday, 4th--"At home all day. Mrs. Peake and her daughter here."

Sunday, 11th--"Old Mr. Digges came over in the forenoon; also Mr. Willis and Polly Brazier. Willis returnd. in the afternoon."

Sunday, 18th--"Mr. Tilghman returned to Alexa. Miss Calvert and Mrs. Washington and self went to Pohick Church. In the Afternoon Mr. B. Fairfax came."

Sunday, 25th--"Went up to Alexandria Church and returned to dinner."

August - Sunday, 1st--"At Mr. Calvert's all day."

Sunday, 8th--"Went up to Alexa. Church and returned to Dinner. Captn. Posey and Son Price here, the last of whom went away after Dinner.

Sunday, 15th--"At home all day--alone."

Sunday, 22nd--"Went up to Church at Alexandria and returned to Dinner. Found Doctr. Craik here, who stayed all Night."

August - Sunday, 29th--"Govr. Eden and the other Gentn. went away after breakfast. I continued at home all day."

September- Sunday, 5th--"Went up with him and Miss Nelly Calvert to Alexa. Church. Returnd to Dinner."

Sunday, 12th--"Govr. Eden, Captn. Ellis, Mr. Dulany, Mr. Lee and Mr. Fendal came to Dinner and stayd all Night, as did Mr. F. Willis, Junr."

Sunday, 19th--"The two Mr. Alexanders went away after breakfast. My Brother Sam, his Wife and two children, came to Dinner."

Sunday, 26th--"I set of for Annapolis Races. Dined at Rollin's and got into Annapolis between five and six Oclock. Spent the Evening and lodged at the Governor's."

October - Sunday, 3rd--"At home all day, alone."

Sunday, 10th--"Mr. Herbert went away before Breakfast. Mr. Tilghman went with Mrs. Washington and I to Pohick Church and returned with us."

Sunday, 17th--"At home all day--Captn. Conway Breakfasting here from the Maderias. Mr. Willis and my Brother went up to Church."

Sunday, 24th--"At Colo. Bassett's all (day)."

Sunday, 31st--"At Colo. Bassett's all day."

November - Sunday, 7th--"Dined at Mrs. Dangerfield's and returned to Colo. Bassett's in the afternoon."

Sunday, 14th--"Returnd to Colo. Bassett's to Dinner."

Sunday, 21st--"Dined at the Speaker's and spent the Evening in my own Room."

Sunday, 28th--"At Colo. Bassett's all day."

December - Sunday, 5th--"At Colo. Bassett's all day."

Sunday, 12th--"At home all day the above company here. Mrs. Washington and Miss Brown going to Chh. and returning to Dinner."

Sunday, 19th--"At home all day alone. After Dinner Mrs. Barnes went to Mrs. French's."

Sunday, 26th--"At home all day. Mr. Ben Dulany, and Mr. Peale dined here.

Let the record speak. It shows eight attendances over the period of a whole year. Perhaps this is not a representative year. His diary shows that in the year 1760 he went to church sixteen times. That was the year following his marriage![48]

The most common entry on the Sunday when he did attend services is, "Went to Church. Returnd. to Dinner." And that speaks very eloquently of George Washington's church attendance. There were many other things of equal interest to him, and, in many instances, of apparent greater interest. The total score as revealed in the diaries is 126 Sundays of church attendance from 1748 to 1799--though not all of the years are accounted for.

One is a little surprised to observe that our gallant doesn't note the fact that he was accompanied to church by his wife until January 20, 1771. Henceforth he seems much chummier, frequently stating that Mrs. Washington attended with him. He never comments on the sermons. Perhaps they didn't impress him. And, if the Reverend Mr. Massey's eloquence and inspiration were no better than his veracity, I doubt if he could have held Washington's interest.

Testifying as to his "constancy" in attendance at church, Massey said, as reported by the Rev. Mr. E. C. M'Guire

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[48] Washington, op. cit., vol. I.

in his book The Religious Opinions and Character of Washington (1836):

> "I never knew so constant an attendant on Church as Washington. And his behavior in the house of God was ever so deeply reverential that it produced the happiest effect on my congregation, and greatly assisted me in my pulpit labors....No company ever withheld him from Church. I have often been at Mount on the Sabbath morning when his breakfast table was filled with guests, but to him they furnished no pretext for neglecting his God, and losing the satisfaction of setting a good example. For, instead of staying at home, out of false complaisance to them, he used constantly to invite them to accompany him." 49

Poor Mr. Massey! If Washington was the most constant attendant on church that he knew, he must have preached to empty pews a good part of the time.

But of course Massey's version simply doesn't square with Washington's diaries. In fact, an entry for Sunday, June 20, 1773 (already quoted) states, "Colo. Fairfax and Lady, as also Mr. Massey dined here, Patcy Custis being buried. The first went away, Mr. Massey stayd." With all due reverence for the occasion of Patcy Custis's passing, still the conclusion is that not even Mr. Massey attended church that Sunday.

Is it any wonder that I have been dubious about the evidence of the various clergymen who touched upon George Washington's life? Parson Weems is an out-and-out fabricator. Bishop Meade, who knew ministers who knew Washington,

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49 Johnson, op. cit., p. 56.

isn't reliable. The Rev. Mr. Massey can't be depended upon. And the Rev. Mr. M'Guire accepts testimony of questionable character. I don't doubt that these worthy divines, with the exception of Weems, meant well. The point is they are all trying to prove too much about Washington. In their eagerness to count him among the faithful they detour certain facts and they arrive at conclusions which are not justifiable.

Washington was not a constant attendant on church! Nor was he a particularly devout churchman when he did go.

For example, Bishop Meade speaks of Washington's "strict fasting on appointed days."[50] Yet the only reference I could find to fasting in his diaries was this entry of June 1, 1774, "Went to Church and fasted all day." As Stephenson and Dunn point out, "that same day red-coated Soldiers marched through the streets of Boston."[51] It was the day the Boston Port Bill went into effect, and the Colonials had agreed to call for a country-wide fast. Washington was probably quite sincere in his observance of this fast, but it was politically inspired and he was motivated by political reasons. Then, as in other times of trial, he turned to God. Interestingly enough, in spite of his fail-

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50 Meade, op. cit., p. 255.

51 Stephenson and Dunn, op. cit., vol. I, p. 314.

ure to live up to the clergy's picture of him as a Christian, nevertheless he seemed always to find help and inspiration from God.

Bishop Meade speaks of Washington's "conscientious observance of the Sabbath."[52] And yet we have this testimony from Washington himself which does not exactly bear it out. "September, 1784--Sunday 19th--'Being Sunday, and the People living on my Land, apparently very religious, it was thought best to postpone going among them till tomorrow." (As I noted before, Washington was wont to transact business on Sunday.) Again in 1789 he writes:

> "On the Seventh, now called the first day, for want of a place of Worship (within less than nine miles) such letters as do not require immediate acknowledgement I give answer to....But it hath so happened, that on the two last Sundays--call them the first or the seventh as you please--I have been unable to perform the latter duty on account of visits from Strangers, with whom I could not use the freedom to leave alone, or recommend to the care of each other, for their amusement." 53

Where do Mr. Massey's statements that "no company ever withheld him from Church," or, "for, instead of staying at home, out of false complaisance to them, he used constantly to invite them to accompany him," figure in this picture? In one case Washington puts off transacting business

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52 Meade, op. cit., p. 255.

53 Honor to Washington, p. 53.

on Sunday for fear of offending his tenants; and in the other he not only indulges in what Mr. Massey might term "false complaisance" to entertain his guests, but complains because they keep him, not from church, but from his casual correspondence!

This brief glimpse of Washington's church attendance record implies that while he was faithful to the Church, he was by no means a devout churchman. Church and State were closely linked in his mind. Sherwood Eddy quotes Rupert Hughes as saying that Washington "took a great interest in his duties as a vestryman. That must not be taken to mean too much concerning his piety. Jefferson also was a vestryman....He contributed more liberally to church building than Washington ever did, and he was much concerned with Jesus, whom Washington never once mentioned by name in his countless writings. A Virginian had to be a vestryman to be a burgess."[54] (Italics supplied by the present writer).

While Hughes has been criticized for his private opinions in his three volume biography, George Washington, the facts in the above quotation are all verifiable and they certainly indicate a close interest between George Washington's political and his religious life; a reflection of the

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[54] Sherwood Eddy, The Kingdom of God and the American Dream (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), pp. 117-118.

kinship between the two as regarded the whole planter population. As for Hughes's comment on Washington's failure to mention the name of Jesus in his writings, we shall deal with that more fully later on.

Though Washington was modest, his letters reveal him to have been ambitious. When he stood for or thought of standing for the office of Burgess, he wrote his brother:

> "I should be glad if you could discover (their) ....real sentiments on this head....without disclosing much of mine. If they should be inclined to promote my interest and things should be drawing to a crisis, you then may declare my intention and beg their assistance....Sound their pulse with an air of indifference and unconcern; after that you may regulate your conduct according to circumstances." 55

It is entirely possible, and not an unreasonable conclusion, that, whatever his private theology, his interest in the Episcopal Church was social and political rather than religious.

At any rate it would seem wise to examine the religious environment in which his middle years were lived, and see how it touched, influenced, impinged upon, or failed to affect his life.

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55 Honor to Washington, p. 56.

III

VIRGINIA, A "RELIGIOUS DESERT"

CHAPTER III

VIRGINIA, A "RELIGIOUS DESERT"

The plan of this and the next two chapters is to glance at the state of religion in the Colonies as a whole before the Revolution; thence to have a look at Anglicanism in Virginia; then Deism; and finally to examine Washington's record and practices as a member of the Established, and later, the Episcopal Church.

William Warren Sweet, one of the most reliable of our present-day Church historians, says of the condition of religion in the Colonies: "By the end of the Colonial period there had come to be more unchurched people in the American Colonies in proportion to the population, than were to be found anywhere else in Christendom."[56]

Kenneth Scott Latuorette in the fourth volume of his monumental work, The History of the Expansion of Christianity, traces the failing influence of Christianity in the eighteenth century to the rise of rationalism of that

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[56] William Warren Sweet, Religion in Colonial America (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 334.

century and to Deism "which was so prominent in intellectual circles in eighteenth century Europe."[57]

Williston Walker, another great Church historian, says: "For more than a generation (1755-1789) men's thoughts were absorbed in these questions [military and political], and religion in America was at a low ebb."[58]

Henry M. Shires, in his article "Modern American Christianity in the Light of History," says that "in every colony there was also a considerable body of 'unchurched liberals' and of those with no interest in religion at all. It must be admitted that religious freedom was in a large measure the product of a rather widespread religious indifference."[59]

How did the Established Church fit into this picture? Well, it seems to have been the ideal denomination for the refuge of those aristocrats who were content with the outward forms of religion so long as they were allowed the

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57 Kenneth Scott Latourette, The Great Century (New York: Harper & Bros., 1941), p. 431.

58 Williston Walker, A History of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. 572.

59 Henry M. Shires, "Modern American Christianity in the Light of History," in Christianity and the Contemporary Scene, by Randolph Crump Miller and Henry H. Shires (New York: Morehouse-Gorham Co., 1943), p. 78.

freedom of somewhat contrasting private opinions. Most of the leaders of the Revolution, especially the Virginians, were members of the Established Church, and apparently in good standing. Yet the charge is persistently made that they were also all "more or less Deists and skeptics like Washington, Jefferson, Randolph of Roanoke, Madison and most of the leaders of thought," as Thomas C. Hall expresses it. And, "as in the case of George Washington such membership implied no sort of living interest in the issues upon which organized religion lays stress....and as far as one can ascertain their opinions were in general founded upon the prevalent type of philosophy, of which John Locke is the classic expression."[60] (And, I might add, Thomas Paine is the neo-classic.)

The position of the Church in Virginia was both strong and weak. It was established by law. That is, provisions were made by law for clerical salaries and for land, called a "glebe" which went with the office. By 1724 the "value of the livings had....been fixed at 16,000 pounds of tobacco a year, besides the products of the glebes and special fees for marriages, burials, and other services.[61] The

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[60] Hall, op. cit., pp. 120, 162-163.

[61] William Wilson Manross, A History of the American Episcopal Church (New York: Morehouse Publishing Company, 1935), p. 70.

total income amounted to anywhere from eighty pounds sterling (though in some cases it was much lower) to one hundred in the "sweet scented" parishes where the best tobacco grew. Few, only five or six, of the clergy had been formally inducted; that is, recommended by the vestries to the Governor for induction which would give them whatever cure they were in, for life. So most of them remained upon a temporary tenure and were almost wholly subject to the whim of the vestry.

Parishes varied from twenty to forty miles in length. The churches were generally poorly kept and equipped. And though the parishes were bound by law to the upkeep of glebes and parsonages, little attention seems to have been paid to the law.

Services were usually limited to one each Sunday in the regular churches, and once or twice a month in the "chapels of ease." Holy Communion was celebrated on Christmas, Easter, and Whitsunday and perhaps two or three more times during the year.[62]

Washington records only one attendance at the Christmas services. And the only references to Easter and Whitsunday appear in a contract with one Philip Bater, a gardener at Mount Vernon, in which Bater is allowed "four dol-

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[62] Manross, op. cit., pp. 70-71.

lars at Christmas with which he may be drunk 4 days and 4 nights; two dollars at Easter to effect the same purpose; two dollars more at Whitsuntide to be drunk two days; a Dram in the morning and a drink of Grog at dinner or at noon."[63]

Church attendance seems to have been fairly good, but the holy days were apparently neglected. Most of the clergymen were conscientious in catechizing the youth of the parish, and expressed themselves as willing to do the same for the negroes "when their masters permitted it, but this was seldom the case."[64]

Virginia to this day has a reputation for "Low Church" practices in ritual. And the foregoing information indicates as much. Hall says that the "Anglo-Catholic religious tradition never had any real hold upon even official Virginia....In the first place no bishop was sent....The church buildings were as seemingly bare as in New England, and the services as depressing."[65]

He attributes the Established Church's "curious position" in Virginia to the fact that the majority of English settlers came from a class with strong Dissenter traditions. In England they had paid for the Established Church as the

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63 Fitzpatrick, op. cit., p. 459.

64 Manross, op. cit., p. 71.

65 Hall, op. cit., p. 112.

price of being let alone, and they favored the same arrangement in the Colonies. Hall says the "establishment in Virginia was almost nominal and had seemingly almost no religious influence outside a very small range of colonial life."[66]

Arguing in the famous "Parson's Cause" case, the suit brought by the Rev. John Maury against his vestry over salary differences, Patrick Henry arraigned the Church in this manner: "The only use of an Established Church and clergy in society is to enforce obedience to civil sanctions, and the observance of those which are called duties of imperfect obligation; that when a clergy ceases to answer these ends, the community have no further need of their ministry, and may justly strip them of their appointments."[67]

Henry afterward apologized to Maury, saying that he had delivered the diatribe to gain popularity. And though no one accepts this attack in the light of sober evidence, still the fact that it proved popular enough to win the case for Henry, shows that common sentiment did not favor the "Parson" in the "Cause."[68]

The famous, or infamous, Tobacco Act of 1756 lay behind the Parson's Cause. Through it the Burgesses gave

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66 Hall, op. cit., pp. 116-117.

67 Albert Bushnell Hart, American History Told by Contemporaries (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1898), vol. II, p. 105.

68 Hall, op. cit., p. 119.

"directions to the colonial agent to defend any suits brought against the vestries in consequence of the Act, but not against others."[69]

The reasonable conclusion to draw from all this evidence is that the Established Church and Clergy were not held in very high repute by the planter class who made the laws and controlled the economy in Virginia. Religion was almost a part of the famous Virginia system of social amenities.

John Howard Hinton, writing in 1832, says: "....unhappily, it [Virginia] was a religious desert, the ecclesiastical revenues of which were absorbed by a tribe of irreligious clergymen, and the people abandoned to neglect and impiety."[70]

Washington's own experiences with one clergyman, the Rev. Jonathan Boucher, bear out the above charge in part. Boucher had a school for young gentlemen which he conducted in various places in Virginia. Jacky Custis, Washington's stepson, was sent to him, and he, Washington, soon began to receive long lists of books which the clergyman claimed were purchased for Jacky's benefit. But a perusal of the titles, and a consideration of the length of the list along with Jacky's age, persuades one that Boucher was thinking more of

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[69] Manross, op. cit., p. 73.

[70] John Howard Hinton, History of the United States, Vol. II, p. 373, quoted in Hall, op. cit., p. 115.

his own reading than of his pupil's. However, Washington approved the list without question, though he may have been secretly amazed at his stepson's sudden erudition. And his approval apparently encouraged the Rev. Mr. Boucher to become bolder. So he suggested a European "Grande Tour" for Jacky and himself, the Custis estate to meet all the expenses.

This looked too much like a junket to Washington, who, indulgent as he was, never ceased to be a practical and astute manager. While granting the advantages of travel, he nevertheless turned down Boucher's request.

This fact may account for "the captious sneer with which that self-sufficient clergyman [Boucher] disposed of his relations with Washington in his autobiography"; though no hint of it appears in his correspondence.[71]

Madison, Jefferson, and Franklin, all nominally Episcopalian, nevertheless were leaders in the fight for religious liberty; a paradoxical attitude if the idea of an Established Church had had any strong hold upon them. Madison had been brought up in the Anglican Church, but was never a communicant. Jefferson hadn't much use for the formal element in Christianity such as the priesthood and church dogma, though he accepted the Church's ministration. A short time before his death Franklin said of Jesus, "I have with most of

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[71] Fitzpatrick, op. cit., pp. 153-154.

the Dissenters in England, some doubts as to His Divinity, tho' it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having neither studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble." A few weeks later he was in full possession of the facts. Like Madison and Jefferson, he "accepted the ministrations of the Episcopal Church but was never a communicant."[72]

However, here one must realize that since there was no bishop in the country, confirmation, naturally, was impossible. So it is possible that George Washington never thought of himself as a full-fledged churchman; an attitude typical of his class in Virginia. And it may account for Bishop White's statement that he never observed Washington either take communion or kneel in church, during all the time he worshipped in Philadelphia.[73]

Washington did not enter into the controversy over an American Episcopate. The only comment he makes upon it is this brief excerpt, from his writings of 1769:

> "After a tiresome, and in my opinion, a very unimportant session, I returned home about the middle of

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[72] Sweet, op. cit., p. 337. "Pope Leo XIII was accustomed to say that the principal motive of those advocating the cause of religious liberty was indifference." Ibid., p. 336.

[73] Ibid., p. 335.

> last Month....The expediency of an American Episcopate was long and warmly debated, and at length rejected. As a substitute, the House attempted to frame an Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction, to be composed of a President and four other clergymen, who were to have full power and authority to hear and determine all matters and causes relative to the clergy, and to be vested with the (power) of Suspension, deprivation, & visitation. From this Jurisdiction an Appeal was to be had to a Court of Delegates, to consist of an equal number of Clergymen and Laymen; but this Bill, after much canvassing, was put to Sleep, from an opinion that the subject was of too much importance to be hastily entered into at the end of a Session." [74]

Two years later, July 12, 1771, the House of Burgesses was to pass a resolution of thanks to four Anglican clergymen for "wise and well-timed opposition" to a plan to set up an American Episcopate. This the House of Burgesses thought "pernicious." And for once they joined, dissenters and liberal churchmen alike, in a unanimous vote. They were drawn together in a common opposition to imperial centralization.[75]

Washington and his compatriots would brook no interference in government from the Established Church, which they felt was wholly subservient to the Burgesses and which they ruled through the vestries. Formal religion was a creature of man, but God was the Supreme Authority over the nation.

Perhaps some light on the relation George Washing-

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[74] Honor to Washington, p. 51.

[75] Stephenson and Dunn, op. cit., pp. 301-302.

ton made between God and the State may be gleaned from his keynote speech as president of the Constitutional Convention soon after the War. "It is too probable," he said, "that no plan we propose will be adopted. Perhaps another dreadful conflict is to be sustained. If, to please the people, we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterward defend our work. Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair; the event is in the hands of God."[76]

To congress in 1793 Washington said: "I humbly implore that Being on whose will the fate of nations depends to crown with success our mutual endeavors for the general happiness." And again in 1794: "Let us unite therefore in imploring the Supreme Ruler of nations to spread His holy protection over these United States:....to perpetuate to our country that prosperity which His goodness has already conferred, and to verify the anticipation of this government being a safeguard to human rights."[77]

I purposely allowed this consideration of the Anglican Church in Virginia to broaden into comment on the relation between Church and State, because, as I see it, it typifies Washington's approach to religion. While he could be quite indifferent to the established forms of religion on

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[76] Ernest Sutherland Bates, American Faith (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1940), p. 290.

[77] Honor to Washington, p. 54.

the one hand, and sometimes almost arrogant in his attitude toward them, he could at the same time be be utterly humble before God, and acknowledge His interposition in the fortunes of the new country.

The question arises in my mind as to whether or not George Washington actually thought of the Church at Pohick, for instance, as a place to meet with and worship God. There is a strong sense of duty present in most everything George Washington ever did, and it seems pretty certain from the evidence that it extended to his relations with the Episcopal Church. It was his duty to go to Church. It was his duty to set the example for his family, his fellow planters, and the country. But his duty may not have been his pleasure.

On the other hand, his relations with God seem to achieve a note of real pleasure. There is no pretense here. He is genuinely humble. He is pleased with the guardianship that Providence has seen fit to extend to him and his country. There is a note of affinity in his relations with God, which one never catches in his relations with the Church.

He never quite seems to accept the fact that the Church is God's representative on earth; that the same Holy Spirit which may have had a hand in the fortunes of the Colonies in their struggle for freedom, is the same Holy Spirit who has guided the Church from the beginning.

He never appears to have viewed the Church as an intercessor. He went directly to God over its head.

And now I think it is time to consider another influence in Washington's background, before taking up more specifically his position in the Established Church.

I refer to Deism.

IV

DEISM IN AMERICA

CHAPTER IV

DEISM IN AMERICA

It appears that most of the Revolutionary leaders were Deists. Sherwood Eddy includes Benjamin Franklin, Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison, John Adams, Ethan Allen, and Thomas Paine.[78]

Now a deist, theologically speaking, is "a person who believes that God is transcendent but not immanent; that God created the world, and then abandoned it, and that he takes little or no interest in His creation and cannot be reached by prayers. In practice this leads to atheism.... for man cannot long continue to believe in a God who does not love him, and will not hear his prayer."[79]

Deism strove to be a universal, natural religion. And as early as 1624 the lines had been laid down by one Edward Herbert of Cherbury who listed various articles of belief supposed to constitute natural religion as primitive

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[78] Eddy, op. cit., p. 79.

[79] Claude Beaufort Moss, The Christian Faith (New York: Morehouse-Gorham Co., 1944), pp. 12-13.

man knew it. Its points were: "God exists; He is to be worshipped; virtue is his true service; man must repent of wrong doing; and there are rewards and punishments after death."[80]

As these ideas developed, they came to include the proposition that whatever is believed without proof is superstition. Freedom means release from superstition. Hence only the rational thinkers are free. Those who would hold man in the chains of superstition are the priests, the worst enemies of mankind. Since all that is valuable of revelation had been given man long before Christ, Christianity brought nothing new. Anything that is not clear to reason, or is above reason in revelation is, then, superstition and of no worth. Miracles are either superfluous, or an insult to the perfect workmanship of the Creator.

Thus we see Deism had no use for Christianity or its authoritative revelation. So it was often denounced as a form of atheism. "Its God was afar off, a being who once for all established certain religious principles, essentially rules of morality, and set a wonderfully contrived mechanical world in motion with which he has nothing now to do. Its merit was that it forced consideration of the fundamental reasonableness and moral worthiness of religious

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[80] Walker, op. cit., p. 487.

claims."[81]

In America the two reactions to the growing secularization of the age of the eighteenth century were: the narrow Calvinism of New England; and the attempt to "infuse religion into the entire cultural movement, though with the risk that Religion itself might get lost in the process." This latter reaction, led by liberal American leaders like Washington, Jefferson, Madison et al, led "first to the development of Natural Religion, and then on to Deism."[82]

The orthodox faith woke up one day to discover that in Natural Religion with its reasonableness of religion and its tendency toward Humanism, substitution of desire for happiness for the old Calvinistic sense of sin, and frankly rationalistic speculation, it had entertained a guest who was threatening to overthrow the household.

One divine, the Rev. Ebenezer Gay, cast doubt upon the infallibility of the Bible through his emphasis upon the distinction between Natural and Revealed Religion. And one Charles Chauncey of Harvard, after calling revivalism, Calvinism, and the episcopacy to task, came to the conclusion that the "Goodness of the Creator, implies the goodness of the creation, and involves a natural goodness in man as a

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81 Walker, op. cit., pp. 487-488.

82 Bates, op. cit., p. 218.

part of creation. His benevolent universe had no place for Hell."[83]

So, instead of reinforcing Christianity as those who had brought in Natural Religion had hoped would be its effect, it was bidding fair to supplant it under the name of Deism. Deism had its own positive content to offer in place of Christianity, and "definite ethical and political implications." It was, in fact, almost a throw-back to the static Nature religions. It took a more distinctly moral flavor than Christianity and sought as its end the good of humanity. Its gospel was that of "intellectual and spiritual liberation" and sought to give men a "broader outlook on the world" and to free them "from the parochialisms to which they had been accustomed."

Virtue, to the Deists, was a sort of enlightened self-interest "which practiced self-restraint as the means to secure more permanent satisfaction." They were "hedonistic or eudaemonistic."

While never doubting "that man had an innate sense of right and wrong," the Deists were prone to view conscience as one of the functions of reason, and insisted that "the conscience must also be intelligent." The result was to

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[83] Bates, op. cit., pp. 219-226.

broaden the base of freedom of conscience to include "freedom of thought in every field."

Deism spread throughout the colleges, making serious inroads upon the thought at Yale, Harvard, and Princeton, and apparently wholly capturing William and Mary where, according to Bates, "an avowedly secular and nonsectarian policy was pursued" and "Deism was virtually the accepted college religion."

> "Thus by the time of the Revolution, Deism was fairly well on its way to being naturalized in America. Its intellectual arguments and its devotion to science were of interest primarily to educated groups, but it also possessed distinct elements of mass appeal. Its individualism was congenial to the frontier, its democracy recommended it to the city tradesmen, and its humanitarianism allied it with Quakerism.
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> "Nearly all of the leaders of the American Revolution were Deists, not Orthodox Christians. Samuel Adams, Roger Sherman and John Jay were almost the only exceptions, while the Deists numbered among them Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Ethan Allen, Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison and the Revolutionary poets, Joel Barlow and Philip Freneau." 84

It is interesting to note in passing that with all its brave prattle about science, rationalism, and natural religion as opposed to revealed religion, Deism borrowed the Christian dogmas of personal immortality, to which, in the light of its own presuppositions, it had no right.[85]

Deism's most prominent exponent in America was Thomas Paine, whose "Common Sense" (1776) and "Rights of Man"

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84 Bates, op. cit., pp. 219-226.

85 Ibid., p. 225.

(1791) and "Age of Reason" (1795) built up a strong case for Deism as well as, in the case of "Common Sense" doing great service to the Revolution.[86]

Sherwood Eddy discounts the extremes to which some historians credit Deism of the Colonial and Revolutionary times. He claims the term meant "little more than the equivalent of modernist, liberal or humanist today," and principally appealed to the educated because of its "individualism, democracy, rationalism and humanitarianism."[87]

Washington could hardly have escaped contact with Deism. He was personally acquainted with all the Revolutionary leaders. He was interested in France from whence many Deistic ideas came....and he was a prominent Mason.

Undoubtedly many sincere, informed, and wholly orthodox Christians do belong and have belonged to the Masonic Order, but that does not alter the fact that Freemasonry is traditionally Deistic. When it came to America, not long before Washington's birth, it was an organization which imposed no religious tests other than belief in "the Great Architect of the Universe." Its teachings were not specifically Christian, but ethical. Morality, brotherly love, and mutual help were taught.

Some time after 1717 the Grand Lodge in London abol-

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86 Walker, op. cit., p. 492.

87 Eddy, op. cit., p. 82.

ished the ancient charge "to be true to God and Holy Church" and substituted a charge to "obey the Moral Law" and only to be obliged "to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular opinions to themselves." Thus was modern Freemasonry "founded upon the rock of non-sectarianism and the brotherhood of all men who believe in a common Father, regardless of his name, or the way in which he is worshipped."[88]

No doubt this extreme tolerance and its belief in the brotherhood of man appealed to the broad-minded and democratic Washington.

At any rate at the age of twenty he became an Entered Apprentice at the Lodge in Fredricksburg. And subsequently swiftly passed through the stages of Fellow Craft, and Master Mason.[89]

His views toward the religious side of Masonry are fairly well summed up in this excerpt from a letter to the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania in 1792: "....At the same time I request you will be assured of my best wishes and earnest prayers for happiness while you remain in this Terrestial Mansion, and that we may thereafter meet as brethren in the Eternal Temple of the Supreme Architect."[90]

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88 Honor to Washington (Carl H. Claudy), pp. 168-169.

89 Ibid., p. 169.

90 Ibid., p. 173.

Washington was given a Masonic burial at Mount Vernon on December 18, 1799 by the Alexandria Lodge No. 22.[91]

Apropos of the teachings of Deism and Freemasonry George Washington in his letters to his nephew and other young relatives gives them plenty of admonishments about their morals, but nowhere does he recommend use of the Bible, Church attendance, observance of the Sabbath, or avoidance of infidelity to the Faith.

His library contained many heretical works such as the writings of Paine, Priestly, Voltaire, and Frederick the Great. And his religious practices and beliefs show evidence of their influence. They were "chilled by the cold and rationalistic deism of the 18th Century and....handicapped by the morals of slavery."[92]

Washington lived up to the non-sectarian principles of Freemasonry, for with al his outward devotion to the Episcopal Church he never espoused its cause, and, as was shown above, he was frequently on the side of interests seeking to curb it. His tolerance actually came dangerously close to intolerance in his stand on the Episcopacy; lack of which was admittedly the greatest handicap from which the Anglican Church suffered in its pre-Revolutionary days in America.

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91 Honor to Washington, p. 178.

92 Eddy, op. cit., pp. 118, 119.

But I am not going the whole way to accept the opinion of many historians that Washington was a Deist. I will endeavor to show later on that his basic religious principles, his theology as it is revealed in his various writings and speeches, are not those of a Deist. I will also endeavor to show George Washington in a special relationship to God somewhat akin to that of the great mystics.

However, for the time being, suffice it to say that Deism did touch upon George Washington's life at several points. He was undoubtedly influenced by some of its principles. Obviously it formed a part of his educational equipment, which seems to have been gained largely after he came of age.

Like the ancient Hebrews, Washington was no philosopher; so it is doubtful, as Madison has said, if he thought deeply on religious matters. His peculiar ability to straddle Deism, Anglicanism, and a third sort of personal religion indicates that none of them was particularly well organized or resolved in his mind.

George Washington was not a deep thinker, but a man of action with a rich deposit of broad common sense and a vein of intuitive prophetic genius. He might have been a great thinker, had he been so trained. And he might have been a more understanding Episcopalian had he examined the teachings and theology of the Church with more care.

The worship of a common Father who had no earthly ties and no consecrated priests was easier for him to understand.

Perhaps this excerpt from a letter to the "Ministers and Ruling Elders of the Churches of the Massachusetts and New Hampshire Presbyteries" may give some light on his impartiality in religious and sectarian matters.

> "I am persuaded you will permit me to observe that the path of true piety is so plain as to require but little political direction. To this consideration we ought to ascribe the absence of any regulation respecting religion from the Magna Charta of our country. To the guidance of the ministers of the Gospel this important object is perhaps more properly committed. It will be your care to instruct the ignorant and to reclaim the devious and in the progress of morality and science, to which our government will give every furtherance, we may confidently expect the advancement of true religion and the completion of our happiness." 93

He places the progress of religion almost contingent upon the progress of science; certainly an abhorrent idea for a group of Fundamentalist New England ministers and elders to entertain. And he places the men of God little higher than "moral policemen" as it were, and morality automatically assumes a more important place than the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ "and him crucified." His statements have a distinctly Deistic flavor.

Finally, his association with Madison and Jefferson in Virginia could not have failed to involve him in some

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93 Honor to Washington, p. 50.

degree in their struggle for religious liberty. Their ideas were influenced by John Locke, who demanded "....'absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty' for all dissenters, not as a favor, or as an act of indulgence, but as a right."[94] And Locke was the precursor of Deism in England.[95]

As for Washington's own words, which show Deistic influences at work in his thinking, here are a few examples.

The first is written in 1778 during the War: "The violent gale....and the withdrawing of the Count d'Estaing to Boston....I consider storms and victory under the direction of a wise providence which no doubt directs them for the best of purposes and to bring round the greatest degree of happiness to the greatest number of his people."[96]

This is perhaps more naive than Deistic.

Posing the idea of a Universal Church, he writes: "Of all the animosities which have existed among mankind, those which are caused by differences of sentiments in religion appear to be the most inveterate and distressing, and ought most to be deprecated. I was in hopes, that the lightened and liberal policy, which has marked the present age, would at least have reconciled Christians of every denomina-

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94 Sweet, op. cit., p. 338.

95 Walker, op. cit., p. 487.

96 Honor to Washington, p. 52.

tion so far, that we should never again see their religious disputes carried to such a pitch as to endanger the peace of society."[97]

On tolerance it is interesting to note this passage from a letter to Lafayette dated August 15, 1787: "I am not less ardent in my wish that you may succeed in your plan of toleration in religious matters. Being no bigot myself, I am disposed to indulge the professors of Christianity in the church with that road to Heaven, which to them shall seem most direct, plainest, easiest and least liable to exception."[98] Quite a detached viewpoint for an Episcopalian!

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[97] Honor to Washington, p. 54.

[98] Ibid., p. 51.

V

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S RELATIONS WITH THE CHURCH

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George Washington was baptized April 5, 1732 by an Episcopal clergyman, and two godfathers and one godmother stood for him.[99] This is the last we hear of his godparents.

There is no record of his confirmation, which would have been impossible at any rate, because there was no Bishop in the colonies, and George never went to England. (The farthest he traveled from his native land was to the Barbadoes with his brother Lawrence.)

The first actual evidence of any contact with religion is his youthful signature "over the title page of his father's copy of the Sermons of the Bishop of Exeter."[100] Recalling my own "extensive" reading among sermons, I presume it is safe to say that this represents a writing rather than a religious exercise.

As the years passed, and he became more fully a part of the pleasant life that flowed about him in Virginia, Washington became more faithful in his attendance upon the

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[99] See above, p. 18.

[100] Honor to Washington, p. 46.

Church of his fathers. But one never quite loses the feeling that with him going to church was a social rather than a religious duty.

Pohick Church, in Truro Parish, was about seven miles from Mount Vernon; Christ Church in Alexandria which was in Fairfax parish, was about ten. Washington divided his allegiance between the two. He drew the plans for the new Pohick Church building, and, according to one authority, subscribed liberally to the expense of construction.[101] When the controversy over free-versus-private-pews arose, he seems to have resigned in a huff and transferred his membership to the church in Alexandria, where he paid a top price for a pew.

The Pohick Church is still standing and in use. It is a charming old structure and demonstrates, in a measure, Washington's own impeccable taste. He was a member of its vestry for some eleven years (actually it was the vestry of Truro Parish). During that period there were thirty-one meetings, and Washington attended twenty-three. When absent it was either because of illness, attendance at the House of Burgesses, or travel.[102] This is a good record, and much better than that of his church attendance.

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101 Irving, op. cit., vol. I, p. 207.

102 Honor to Washington, p. 166.

However, it must be remembered that then, as now, the function of a vestry was not specifically religious. In fact, it was much less so then than now. It was vested with civil authority in addition to having complete charge of the finances of the churches in the parish and procurement of ministers. Following the Restoration in 1660 the vestries of Virginia became self-perpetuating by law. This guaranteed that thenceforth they would be composed of the social and economic upper classes.[103]

Here, as in his attendance at church, it is difficult to separate Washington's sense of duty from his feelings on religion. He was never one to shift responsibility. In fact, he had assumed it at an age (eleven years) when most lads are almost wholly frivolous in their outlook on life, and certainly not adult. As a member of the planter class Washington undoubtedly felt it was his duty to be faithful in his obligations to the vestry of Truro. And it is in the same spirit that he seems to have attended church.

However, it is dangerous to impute motives, and in fairness to Washington it must be pointed out that going to church in his day was not as simple as it is now. In view of the means of conveyances, seven and ten miles were fairly long distances, taking from an hour to an hour and a half to cover. The roads were bad, "often little more than

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[103] Sweet, op. cit., p. 31.

mud wallows,"[104] and Washington was careful of his horses.

As for Washington's deportment in church, apparently there is something to be desired, though I do not mean to imply that he was disrespectful. He simply wasn't a very devout Episcopalian. There is no record of his ever having taken the Sacrament of Holy Communion in an Episcopal Church. Johnson quotes the Presbyterian Magazine for February, 1851, which states: "He [Washington] partook regularly of the communion until he entered the office of general in the American Army." He further submits evidence from the Rev. E. C. M'Guire, rector of the Episcopal Church at Fredricksburg, Virginia, who, writing in 1835, said:

> "Among the aged persons residing in the neighborhood of Mount Vernon, and the descendants of such others, as have recently gone down to the grave, there is but one opinion in regard to the fact of his having been a communicant in the Pohick Church previous to the Revolutionary War. The writer himself had it from a respectable lady, that she had once heard her mother unqualifiedly declare that General Washington was a communicant in that Church, in the vicinity of which she had her residence, and on the services of which she attended. A living granddaughter of the Rev. Lee Massey, rector of Mount Vernon Parish [105] for some years after Washington's marriage, says her grandfather on a special occasion told her the same thing in answer to a particular inquiry on the subject." 106

Bishop Meade cites the testimony of the Rev. Mr.

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104 Honor to Washington, p. 166.

105 There was no such parish. It was Truro Parish.

106 Johnson, op. cit., pp. 57-58.

Massey handed down through his family that the fact Washington did attend an open air, Presbyterian celebration of the Lord's Supper while he was encamped near Morristown, N.J., during the winter of 1776-77, "ought to be enough to satisfy a reasonable man of the fact [of Washington's being a practicing communicant of the Episcopal Church]."[107]

The evidence of this participation in the Presbyterian communion seems fairly reliable. It was the semi-annual celebration conducted by the Rev. Dr. Timothy Johnes, Presbyterian parson at Morristown, and, according to one Dr. Samuel H. Coxe who had it from a Dr. Hillyer who in turn had questioned Johnes, Washington asked "if it accords with the canon of your church to admit communicants of another denomination," and being told it was the Lord's Supper and therefore open to all, "the General was found seated with the communicants the next Sabbath."[108]

Such evidence is hardly admissible as actual proof that George Washington partook of the Sacrament in an Episcopal Church.

Ford points out that he was taken to task in a sermon by Dr. White's assistant at Christ Church, Philadelphia, for departing from the service before Communion, after

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107 Meade, op. cit., p. 255. See also above, p. 13.

108 Johnson, op. cit., p. 88.

which he never attended when Communion was to be celebrated. We have this evidence from Washington's step-granddaughter, Nelly Custis, who often accompanied him to church during the presidential years at the Pennsylvania capitol.[109]

Nelly Custis further observes that Washington "always stood during the devotional part of the service." And we have it from Bishop White himself, "....as your letter seems to intend an inquiry on the point of kneeling during the services I owe it to the truth to declare that I never saw him in the said attitude."[110] Stephenson and Dunn also present evidence that Washington, in his attendance at the Pohick Church, stood "bolt upright" during the service "as was the custom of the local magnates of those days."[111] Washington Irving also points out that while Mrs. Washington knelt during the service, Washington himself "always stood, as was the custom at that time."[112]

This is the most revealing of all the comments. For if it actually was the custom for men [of position?] to stand during the worship service, then Washington can hardly be accused of irreverence; though he cannot be credited with proper humility either.

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109 Ford, op. cit., pp. 82-83.

110 Ibid.

111 Stephenson and Dunn, op. cit., vol. I, p. 252.

112 Irving, op. cit., vol. I, p. 207.

However, the point is unimportant. The fact that he did not take Communion sheds far more light on his attitude toward the Church, and induces the conclusion that his attendance upon its worship and practices was on the whole somewhat superficial.

While attending and as President of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia (May 14 to September 27, 1787) he reports that he "went to the Romish Church, to High Mass" on May 27, and on June 17, "Went to Church, Heard Bishop White Preach, and see [sic] him orda in two Gentlemen Deacons."[113]

A year later he records an amusing incident which befell the congregation during services at Pohick Church on Sunday, June 8: "On Sunday we went to Church, the congregation being alarmed (without cause) and supposg. the Gallery at the No. End was about to fall, were thrown into the uttermost confusion; and in the precipitate retreat to the doors many got hurt."[114]

While he was President and in residence at Philadelphia he makes this entry for Friday, December 25, 1789 (the first Christmas service not on a Sunday which Washington reports having attended): "Went to St. Paul's Chapel in the

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113 Fitzpatrick, op. cit., p. 463.

114 Washington, op. cit., vol. III, p. 366.

forenoon. The visitors to Mrs. Washington this afternoon were not numerous, but respectable."[115]

Washington was not without a sly sense of humor, as is further evidenced by this entry for Sunday, July 3, 1791, "Received and answered an address from the inhabitants of York Town, and there being no Episcopal Minister present in the place, I went to hear morning service performed in the Dutch reformed Church--which, being in that language not a word of which I understood, I was in no danger of becoming a proselyte to its religion by the eloquence of the Preacher."[116]

At this point we might add that he seemed to have pretty much resisted the eloquence of the Episcopalian preachers as well.

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115 Washington, op. cit., vol. IV, p. 61.

116 Ibid., p. 203.

VI

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S ATTITUDE TOWARD WORSHIP IN THE ARMY

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While Washington was not so strict a taskmaster with himself when it came to church attendance, he was an almost stern disciplinarian in this matter during his various commands. And, as the subject does not seem to tie up with any one of the other sections but overlaps them all, I will make a separate chapter of it.

I have already pointed out that he insisted upon strict observance of the Sabbath with religious services while he served under Braddock in the French and Indian War. And his general order for July 4, 1775, the day after he took command of the Colonial or Continental Armies, reveals that he had not changed a whit in his ideas concerning the men's worship practices. He "stressed the necessity of discipline as well as union; forbade cursing, swearing and drunkenness, and required and expected that all officers and soldiers not on duty should attend divine services....Cleanliness being next to Godliness the orders were strict for the officers to see that the men were neat and clean."[117]

It is an interesting commentary on Washington's

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[117] Fitzpatrick, op. cit., p. 173.

religious views that he, an Episcopalian Virginian, should have thought it necessary to call the attention of Puritans to God and virtue.[118]

On August 3, 1773, Washington ordered that all Sunday fatigue duty be abolished, in order that the men might have an opportunity for public worship. In closing this order he said, "Both they [the officers] and the men will reflect that we can have but little hopes of the blessing of Heaven on our arms, if we insult it by our impiety and folly."[119]

With all due respect to Washington's deep sense of dependence upon and reverence for God, I can't help but observe, in passing, that discipline being as difficult as it was, any measures which might tend to make the soldiers better "citizens" in their deportment would be thrice welcome.

Washington had urged employment of Chaplains from the first, and the Congress acceded to his request, authorizing their procurement. And in Washington's general orders of July 9, 1776, when the Army was in New York City, he directed that "The Colonels or commanding officers of each regiment are directed to procure for Chaplains accordingly, persons of good character and exemplary lives. To see that

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118 Fitzpatrick, op. cit., p. 173.

119 Ibid., pp. 236-237.

all inferior officers and soldiers pay them a suitable respect and attend carefully upon religious exercises. The blessing and protection of Heaven are at all times necessary but especially so in times of public distress and danger. The General hopes and trusts, that every officer and man will endeavor so to live and act as becomes a Christian Soldier defending the dearest rights and Liberties of his country."[120]

Some of Washington's writings and orders do not have a wholly sincere sound. There is a lot of "window dressing" in them, and this seems to me one case in point. Washington never acknowledged Christ in any of his works, and yet he calls upon his men and officers to act as became Christian soldiers. It is as though Christianity were an expediency with Washington. He is not loathe to make use of it for his own purposes--and, of course, in this case, for the purposes of his country--if need be. But he will not acknowledge its Founder.

One of the first matters attended to after the Army went into its first permanent encampment (Morristown, N.J., January, 1777) was the arrangement of public worship for the men. And on Saturday, April 12, the following order was issued: "All troops in Morristown except the guards, are to attend divine worship tomorrow at the second Bell; the Offi-

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120 Honor to Washington, p. 42.

cers commanding the Corps, are to take care to have their men clean and decent, and that they are to march in proper order to the place of worship."[121]

On May 31, 1777, after the camp had been shifted to Middlebrook, Washington issued his famous order against profanity which he characterized as the "foolish and scandulous practice of profane swearing." And "As a means to abolish this and every other species of immorality Brigadiers are enjoyned to take effectual care, to have divine services duly performed in their respective brigades." Later he commanded divine services for every Sunday, and stated that "even neglect will be considered not only as a breach of orders, but a disregard to decency, virtue and religion."[122]

Whatever else Washington may have had in mind, and how far in piety his thinking actually went, it seems obvious from the above that "divine services" were employed as one means of discipline. Now, I'm not fighting with that as a good idea for the men. As one irreverent soul has characterized church attendance, "it can't do you any harm, and it may do you some good." But I am wondering what it indicates of a man who was far from regular in his own church attendance.

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121 Honor to Washington, p. 48.

122 Loc. cit.

As the war progressed, Washington's general orders improved in diction and ideas. They reflect a polish not wholly native to his literary style. And I think it may be safely assumed that others, possibly Colonel Alexander Hamilton, Washington's aide-de-camp, may have had a hand in them. Witness this order for May 2, 1778, issued at Valley Forge, N.J. (previously quoted), in which this high-flown passage occurs: "While we are zealously performing the duties of good citizens and soldiers we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of religion. To the distinguished character of Patriot it should be our highest glory to add the more distinguished character of Christian."[123]

Following Cornwallis's surrender on October 20, 1781, Washington gave orders for performance of divine services and recommended attendance "with that seriousness of Deportment and gratitude of Heart which the recognition of such reiterated and astonishing interpositions of Providence demands of us."[124]

Here is no mention of Christianity. The order reads more like the words of Washington himself, as do these words in his order for the cessation of hostilities on April

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123 Honor to Washington, p. 49.

124 Loc. cit.

19, 1783 ("eight years to a day from their commencement at Lexington"), "....the Chaplains with the several brigades will render thanks to Almighty God for all his mercies, particularly for his overruling the wrath of Man to his own glory and causing the rage of War to cease among nations."[125]

In passing be it noted that Washington permitted no religious intolerance and censured his army for "celebrating Guy Fawkes Day when the Pope was burned in effigy."[126]

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125 Honor to Washington, p. 49.

126 Ford, op. cit., p. 80.

VII

PROVIDENCE, SOVEREIGN ARBITER OF THE UNITED STATES

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PROVIDENCE, SOVEREIGN ARBITER OF THE UNITED STATES

That George Washington shared a special relationship with God is believable, if we take Washington as a mystic, yet a mystic who was unconscious of the fact in any formal way. If we do not accept this we are thrown back upon the idea of a Special Providence, a God who watches over one, and neglects another. And that just doesn't square with Christian principles.

True, God may use certain persons to help carry on his work in one way or another, but it is hardly reasonable to believe that He sets aside the physical laws in order to preserve them, as the understandably over-enthusiastic Rev. Samuel Davies, who preached on Washington in 1755, would have us believe.

It seems it was customary to ask a clergyman to deliver a sermon to the state militia whenever they assembled for manoeuvres. The Rev. Mr. Davies in a sermon to the militia of Hanover County, said, "I may point out to the public that heroic youth, Colonel Washington, whom I cannot but hope Providence has hitherto preserved in so signal a

manner for some important service to his country."[127]

There is no doubt that George Washington himself felt that he enjoyed the special protection of Providence. As I reported above, he counted the bullet holes in his coat after Braddock's defeat "and acknowledged with common sense practicality that a power higher than man had saved him."[128]

In a letter to his brother, John A. Washington, of July 18, 1755, after Braddock's defeat, he says:

> "As I have heard, since my arrival at this place [Fort Cumberland], a circumstantial account of my death and dying speech, I take this early opportunity of contradicting the first, and of assuring you, that I have not yet composed the latter. But, by the all-powerful dispensation of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability or expectation; for I had four bullets through my coat, and two horses shot under me, yet escaped unhurt, although death was leveling my companions on every side of me." 129

Yet he could also write of the same battle, "We have been beaten, shamefully beaten, by a handful of men who only sought to molest and disturb our march. Victory was their smallest expectation. But see the wondrous works of Providence, the uncertainty of human things."[130]

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127 Stephenson and Dunn, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 154-155.

128 See above, p. 22.

129 Jared Sparks, The Writings of George Washington (New York: Harper & Bros., 1847). 12 vols. Vol. II, p. 89.

130 Little, op. cit., p. 29.

This experience with Braddock's army brought him face to face with the fact of man's dependence upon God, so he thought, and this faith burgeoned into the full-blown religious conviction of mature manhood that his experiences during the Revolutionary War helped to solidify.[131]

Following the victory at St. John's Canada, Washington wrote in his general order for November 15, 1775: "The Commander-in-Chief is confident the army under his immediate direction will show their gratitude to Providence for thus favoring the cause of Freedom and America, by their thankfulness to God, and by their zeal and perseverance in this righteous cause, continue to deserve His blessing."[132] Here is a clear expression of his absolute belief in the ordering of human affairs by Providence.

Fitzpatrick observes of this passage, "The naivete of this reasoning is of value as indicative of George Washington's mental attitude towards the Supreme Being and, regardless of other conclusions, there is in it a simple, child-like faith which commands respect." And then he points out that in all wars in the Christian era each side has claimed God, but here Washington "has given the idea an American flavor by calling on the Continental soldier to

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131 Fitzpatrick, op. cit., pp. 130-131.

132 Honor to Washington, p. 48.

help God."[133]

Writing to Joseph Reed in 1776, Washington says: "I have scarcely emerged from one difficulty before I have plunged into another. How it will end, God in His great goodness will direct. I am thankful for his protection to this time."[134]

Again, answering a communication from Massachusett's General Assembly, after the evacuation of Boston by the British, March 17, 1776, he said:

> "And it being effected without the blood of our soldiers and fellow-citizens must be ascribed to the interposition of that Providence which has manifestly appeared in our behalf through the whole of this important struggle, as well as to the measures pursued for bringing about this happy event.
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> "May that Being who is powerful to save, and in whose hands is the fate of nations, look down upon the whole of the United colonies; may He continue to smile upon their counsels and arms, and crown them with success, whilst employed in the cause of virtue and mankind. May this distressed colony and its capital, and every part of this wide extended continent, through His divine favor, be restored to more than their former lustre and once happy state, and have peace, liberty and safety secured upon a solid, permanent, and lasting foundation." 135

An amusing sidelight is thrown on his faith in the benign interposition of Providence in his announcement of Burgoyne's surrender to General Horatio Gates: "Let every

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133 Honor to Washington, p. 48.

134 Loc. cit.

135 Sparks, op. cit., vol. IX, p. 337.

face brighten and every heart expand with joy and praise to the Supreme Dispenser of all Events, who has granted to us this signal success." General Gates was a notorious bungler, and the implication may be that only the Supreme Dispenser could win a victory for him.[136]

Unfortunately for any argument with Washington over his belief in a Special Providence, events seemed to point in that direction. It was God, not luck, whom Washington credited with gaining his victories for him. And when defeat came, as it often did, or discouragement, he simply put it down to special reason on the part of God. He was firmly convinced of the righteousness of the American cause; so could not think anything other than that God shared this conviction, too.

And when the long struggle was finally over, and victory ours, Washington said these words in his resignation address:

> "I resign with satisfaction the appointment I accepted with diffidence--a diffidence in my abilities to accomplish so arduous a task; which however was superseded by a confidence in the rectitude of our cause, the support of the supreme power of the union, and the patronage of Heaven....and the gratitude for the interposition of Providence and the assistance I have received from my countrymen, increases with every review of the momentous contest.
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> "I consider it as an indispensable duty to close this last act of my official life by commending the

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136 Honor to Washington, p. 48.

> interests of our dearest country to the protection of Almighty God, and those who have the superintendence of them to his holy keeping." 137

After his election to the Presidency he again acknowledges trust in Providence. In his inaugural address of April 30, 1789, he said: "No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency."[138]

Farther along in the same address he says, "We ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself ordained."[139]

Here is a place where he had a wonderful opportunity to speak of Christian principles, but instead he gives us something which is dangerously close, if not actually, Deistic in tone; with one exception, which I will point out later.

The above quotations from Washington's speeches, letters, et cetera, are sufficient to illustrate how closely

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137 Sparks, op. cit., vol. VIII, pp. 504-505.

138 Ibid., vol. XII, p. 4.

139 Ibid., p. 5.

he associated Providence with everything in his life. He may sound perfunctory in these few isolated instances, but they represent a sufficient spread of years to bring out the fact that rather than being perfunctory, his references to God are habitual with him.

Each experience in his life but added to the almost childlike faith he placed in God. Basic to his rather simple theology are the three beliefs: belief in God; belief in His justice; and belief in His interposition in human affairs.

Washington has left us some eighty names for God in his writings. A study of them reveals that the various attributes found in orthodox Christian theology are represented by name (though neither the name of the Son nor the name of the Holy Spirit ever appear). Thus God, to Washington, was almighty, all-good, all-powerful, all-wise, being, unity, omnipotent, father, creator. But it is to be noted that he does not make God out to be eternal, or indivisible. It shows God as both transcendent, "Heaven," and immanent, "Dispenser of Human Events."

However, the list is so heterogeneous as to defy theological analysis. It appears as if Washington often tailored the name of the Deity to fit the occasion, for nothing else could explain the title he gives to God in his order of the day for May 15, 1776, "call Him the Lord and Giver of

victory,"[140] or this one: "Sovereign Arbiter of the United States."[141] This seems to suggest a finite God! if not actually an idea verging on paganism, which, however, was probably farthest from Washington's thoughts.[142]

Possibly the key to his conception of God may be contained in this title (reported by Johnson), "Wonder-Working Deity." God to Washington was a Wonder Worker. Look what he did with a handful of Continentals! See how he deflected the bullets! These events and many more like them in the life of our First President were sufficient to convince him that God was indeed on the side of the United States, and a very dependable Wonder Worker.

But that isn't Christianity.

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[140] Sparks, op. cit., vol. III, p. 392.

[141] Johnson, op. cit., p. 291.

[142] Here are the various terms Washington has used for God:

Almighty
Almighty Being
Almighty Father
Almighty God
Almighty Ruler of the Universe
All-Kind Providence
All-Powerful Guide
All-Powerful Providence
All-Wise Dispenser of Events
All-Wise Disposer of Events
All-Wise and Powerful Being
Author of All Good
Beneficent Author of All Good
Beneficent Being
Benign Parent of the Human Race
Creator
Deity
Dispenser of Human Events
Divine Author of Life & Felicity
Divine Author of our Blessed Religion
Divine Author of the Universe
Divine Beneficence
Divine Blessing

[continued]

And I take issue with Dr. Fitzpatrick when he says

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142 [continued]
Author of Blessings
Being
Beloved Son (This appeared in a prayer Washington is supposed to have used; not original with him.)
Giver of Life
Giver of Victory
God
God of Armies
Good Providence
Gracious and Beneficent Being
Gracious God
Gracious Providence
Grand Architect of the Universe
Great Arbiter of the Universe
Great Author of all Care and Good
Great Director of Events
Great Disposer of Events
Great Father of the Universe
Great and Glorious Being
Great and Good Being
Great Governor of the Universe
Great Power
Great Ruler of Events
Great Ruler of Nations
Great Searcher of Hearts
Jehovah
Kind Providence
Lord
Lord and Giver of All Victory
Lord of Hosts
Lord and Ruler of Nations
Maker
Most Gracious Being
Omnipotent Being
Overruling Providence
Parent of the Universe
Power
Providence
Revelation, Pure and Benign Light of
Ruler of the Universe
Source of Blessings
Divine Goodness
Divine Government
Divine Providence
Sovereign Arbiter of the U.S.
Superintendent of Providence
Supreme Architect
Supreme Author of All Good
Supreme Being
Supreme Dispenser of Every Good
Supreme Ruler of Nations
Supreme Ruler of the Universe
Wise Disposer of Events
Wonder-working Deity

of Washington's names for God that "there is nothing left to be desired on this point."[143] While it's true that there is little left that could be applied to God, there is much to be desired.

As I have said before, nowhere in all his works is to be found a single reference to Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. Johnson claims a small manuscript entitled "Daily Sacrifice" copied in what is alleged to be Washington's handwriting, turned up at an auction of Washington relics owned by various members of the Washington clan and sold April 21, 22, 23 of 1891 in Philadelphia. He quotes from W. Herbert Burk's book Washington's Prayers (1907): "This gem is all in the handwriting of George Washington, when about twenty years old, and is, without exception, the most hallowed of all his writings." Johnson himself does not attempt to decide whether these prayers were original with Washington or not, but he does quote an opinion from Professor S. F. Upham of Drew Theological Seminary, who says: "The 'Daily Prayers' of George Washington abound in earnest thought, expressed in simple, beautiful, fervent and evangelical language. They reveal to us the life of the great patriot and attest his piety. None can read those petitions,

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[143] Fitzpatrick, op. cit., p. 23.

which bore his desires to God, and often brought answers of peace, without having a grander conception of Washington's character. The prayers are characterized by a deep consciousness of sin and by a need of forgiveness, and by a recognition of dependence upon the merits and mercies of our Lord. They contain fervent applications for family friends, and rulers in church and state."[144]

If Mr. Johnson had taken the trouble to compare these so-called Prayers of Washington with certain ones in the Book of Common Prayer he would have found the answer, in part at least, to his question "Whether Washington composed the prayers himself or copied them from some source as yet unknown has not been determined."[145]

Following are a few excerpts from the Fourth Prayer for "Monday Evening": "Most gracious Lord God, from whom proceedeth every good and perfect gift, I offer to thy divine majesty my unfeigned praise and thanksgiving for all thy mercies towards me....be merciful to me, O God, and pardon me for Jesus Christ sake....Bless our rulers in Church and State....bless O Lord the whole race of mankind, and let the world be filled with the knowledge of Thee and thy son Jesus Christ. Pity the sick, the poor, the weak, the needy,

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144 Johnson, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

145 Ibid., p. 23.

the widows and fatherless, and all that mourn or are broken in heart, and be merciful to them according to their several necessities....etc."[146]

If it is possibly true that George Washington used these prayers in the seclusion of his chamber, and yet signally failed ever to mention the name of Jesus Christ or of the Holy Spirit in his public observations on religion, his supplications and prayers, then he was both a hypocrite and a liar, and Mr. Johnson has succeeded in exposing a devil where he sought to uncover a saint![147]

Do these warm and loving names for the Deity sound like the cold and pompous titles set forth above?"--"merciful father, Gracious God, Glorious God, eternal and everlasting God, God of my salvation, Most Gracious Lord God, heavenly Father, kind father, blessed Father, Almighty and eternal Lord God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Holy and eternal Lord God, King of heaven, loving father"? Not to mention the forms he uses for the Saviour which include: "thy son Jesus Christ, Lord Jesus, Jesus Christ our Lord, Dear Son Jesus Christ, lamb, Lord Jesus Christ, thy dear son, my only

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146 Johnson, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

147 I will pass over the matter of whether or not George Washington did pray. There is a strong tradition that he did, but to whom and in what manner is not known.

saviour and J.C."?[148]

Further than this I am not prepared to argue the point. But I think the dissimilarity between these and George Washington's other references to God, and the fact of his inclusion of recognition of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are conclusive evidence that, even if he might have copied these prayers from some source, or sources, as in the case of his Rules of Life, they did not influence his theology nor his general religious outlook.

Washington did mention the Christian religion in some of his writings, but in a more or less detached way as when he wrote to Lafayette, "....I am disposed to indulge the professors of Christianity with that road to Heaven, which to them shall seem most direct, plainest, easiest and least liable to exception."[149]

Addressing the "Bishops, Clergy, and Laity of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the States of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina in General Convention assembled, August 19, 1789," he says: "....It affords edifying prospects, indeed, to see Christians of different denominations dwell together in more charity, and conduct themselves in respect to each other

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148 Johnson, op. cit., pp. 24-35.

149 See above, p.

with a more Christian-like spirit, than ever they have done in any former age, or in any other nation."[150]

Are these the words of a loyal son of the Church speaking to his fellow Episcopalians? Are these, in fact, the words of a Christian? Detached as the office of President might have required him to be, it is hardly conceivable that if Christianity were his religion, he could speak of it in the lofty tones we find in the above two passages.

In an address to the Governors of the States in 1783 he does speak of the "divine Author of our blessed religion....without an humble imitation of whose example in these things we can never hope to be a happy nation."[151]

One of the marked characteristics of Washington's religious attitude is that of tolerance. He was never the narrow bigot, and even in his relations with churches that were making inroads upon the congregations of the Episcopal Church in Virginia, there is no sign of impatience. Here, I presume, he was more the politician than the Episcopalian.

Perhaps one of the most enlightening examples of this tolerant view is to be found in his instructions to Colonel Benedict Arnold, regarding the conduct of the expedition against Canada in 1775. The letter is dated September

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150 George Washington in Old South Leaflets (Directors of the Old South Work, Old South Meeting House, Boston), vol. III, No. 65, p. 7.

151 Sparks, op. cit., vol. VIII, p. 452.

14, 1775, and in one passage he says:

> "I also give it in charge to you to avoid all disrespect of the religion of the country [Roman Catholic], and its ceremonies. Prudence, policy, and a true Christian spirit will lead us to look with compassion upon their errors without insulting them. While we are contending for our own liberty, we should be very cautious not to violate the rights of conscience in others, ever considering that God alone is the judge of the hearts of men, and to Him only in this case are they answerable." 152

Further light is shed on his feeling toward the Roman Catholics in Canada by this order of the day for November 5, 1775:

> "As the commander-in-Chief has been apprised of a design for the observance of that ridiculous and childish custom of burning the effigy of the Pope, he cannot help expressing his surprise, that there should be officers and soldiers in this army so void of commoon sense, as not to see the impropriety of such a step at this juncture; at a time when we are soliciting and have really obtained the friendship and alliance of the people of Canada, who we ought to consider as brethren embarked in the same cause, the defence of the general liberty of America. At such a juncture and in such circumstances to be insulting their religion is so monstrous, as not to be suffered or excused; indeed, instead of offering the most remote insult, it is our duty to address public thanks to these our brethren, as to them we are so much indebted for every late happy success over the common enemy in Canada." 153

This latter passage illustrates again the fact that ofttimes Washington's religious interests were dictated by political expediency. So, what appears on the one hand to be a broad religious tolerance, shows up on the other as simply a "Good Neighbor" policy.

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152 Sparks, op. cit., vol. III, p. 91.

153 Ibid., p. 144.

There are times when one is tempted to conclude that Washington was perhaps more indifferent than tolerant. The fact that he was a slave-holder prevented him from having complete tolerance. Most planters did not feel that Christianity extended to their slaves, and discouraged the efforts of missionaries among them. The Rev. Hugh Jones, Chaplain to the Virginia Assembly, reported in 1724 that the whites disapproved of converting the negroes because "it often makes them proud and not so good servants."[154]

However, it is true that Washington appears to have deplored the institution. In a letter to Lafayette of April 5, 1783, he says:

> "The scheme, my dear Marquis, which you propose as a precedent to encourage the emancipation of the black people in this country from that state of bondage in which they are held, is a striking evidence of the benevolence in your heart. I shall be happy to join you in so laudable a work; but will defer going into a detail of the business, till I have the pleasure of seeing you." 155

And in his will he specifically states, "Upon the decease of my wife, it is my will and desire, that all slaves which I hold in my own right, shall receive their freedom. To emancipate them during her life, would, though earnestly

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154 Edgar Legare Pennington, Thomas Bray's Associates and Their Work Among the Negroes (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1939), p. 39.

155 Sparks, op. cit., vol. VIII, pp. 414-415.

wished by me, be attended with such insuperable difficulties, on account of their intermixture by marriage by the dower negroes, as to excite the most painful sensations, if not disagreeable consequences to the latter, while both descriptions are in the occupancy of the same proprietor." The will goes on to state how provision shall be made for the old and decrepit who are unable to care for themselves, and ends with a specific bequest of freedom to William Lee, Washington's "mulatto man," or the choice of remaining "in the situation he now is" with all benefits and a 30 dollar annuity.[156]

The fact will out that Washington had an amazingly well compartmentalized mind. He always maintained a distinction between a practical condition and an abstract idea. Abstractly, the idea of freedom for the slaves appealed to him, but he never let is get in the way of his business judgment. As he saw it, it would have been a bad business policy to free his slaves; so he never did until his death, and then only upon various conditions.

But I don't want to convey the impression that Washington was wholly calculating, simply virtuous in a non-moral sort of way. He was, actually, a man overflowing with virtue. In fact, the common Christian virtues were so

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[156] Johnson, op. cit., pp. 238-240.

numerous and prominent in him, that if we find him lost to the Church from a theological point of view, certainly his life was all that could be asked for from a moral standpoint, with the one exception that was discussed above--slavery.

On this point he fell down completely, for he entertained the idea in his correspondence with Lafayette, and two of his friends and fellow Virginians, Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry, were ready to emancipate their slaves. Furthermore he had the example of many Quakers who had already done so. He knew, too, that his own tremendous prestige would have carried the fight for general emancipation. The country was much more ready for it economically than it was later when King Cotton ruled the South. Then, if ever, was the propitious time to act, and Washington, feeling that he could not afford the financial loss, sat back, rationalizing that, as he was one of the wealthiest men in the country, how could he ask others less able to afford the loss, to make the sacrifice from which he shrank himself?

One understands better, in the light of the slavery question, how a man with the fine moral sensibilities of Washington could, on occasion, appear to be such an utter hypocrite in his relations with the Episcopal Church.

But before taking up what seem to be Washington's actual religious beliefs, I want to give some discussion as to the virtues which characterized his, in some ways, almost saintly life.

VIII

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S ETHICS

CHAPTER VIII

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S ETHICS

The basic Christian virtues of temperance, justice, fortitude, prudence, faith, hope, and love were nicely combined in George Washington's character, frequently demonstrated in his life.

Bishop Meade has told us, "Not only was he addicted to no kind of intemperance, scarcely ever tasting ardent spirits or exceeding two glasses of wine--which was equal to total abstinence in our day--and not using tobacco in any shape, but he used his authority in the army to the utmost to put down swearing, games of chance, and drinking, and irregularities of every kind."[157]

We have already taken note of his general order for July 4, 1775, forbidding cursing, swearing, and drunkenness. And though Bishop Meade's statement may contain a liberal mixture of whitewash, nevertheless I can find no evidence that Washington actually was an intemperate man.

Paul Haworth, who studied Washington as a country gentleman, has written, "He often drank beer with the meal,

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157 Meade, op. cit., vol. II, p. 248.

with one or two glasses of wine and perhaps as many more afterward....He was, in fact, no prohibitionist, but he was a strong believer in temperance. He and the public men of his time, being aristocrats, were wine drinkers, and a few of them were drunkards....One of his last bills of lading is for 'two pipes of fine old London....Madeira Wine.'"[158]

If George Washington had any outstanding weakness it was giving way, on occasion, to fits of berserk rage. In one instance in which Washington's plans had been ruined by the duplicity of the Frenchman Rochambeau he was so possessed with rage that he failed even to recognize Robert Morris who had come to see him in an official capacity.[159] In another, reported by his secretary, Tobias Lear, he learned of St. Clair's rout during dinner. He gave no hint of his perturbation, but when the ladies retired and he was alone with Lear his smouldering anger burst its bounds, and he hurled imprecations upon St. Clair's head.

"This torrent came out in tones appalling," Mr. Lear reports. "His very frame shook. It was awful!"

But he soon controlled himself and said to Lear, "This must not go beyond this room. General St. Clair shall have justice; I looked hastily through the dispatches, saw

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158 Paul Leland Haworth, George Washington Country Gentleman (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1925), pp. 300-301.

159 Stephenson and Dunn, op. cit., vol. II, p. 164.

the whole disaster, but not all particulars. I will receive him without displeasure; I will hear him without prejudice; he shall have full justice."

The sequel to the story is that St. Clair "was exculpated and regained the confidence Washington had in him when appointing him to that command."[160]

This story will also demonstrate Washington's fine sense of justice. Whatever his personal disappointment, he realized at once that he did not know all the facts, and that the trusted officer deserved a fair trial, which he got.

Another example of his sense of justice is in his dealings with the Indians. In one case, after having concluded a treaty with the Creeks in 1790 he wrote, "This event will have us in peace from one end of our border to the other....the basis of our proceedings with the Indian nations has been, and shall be, justice during the period in which I have anything to do with the administration of this government."[161]

There are so many instances of Washington's fortitude that one is at a loss which to choose. There is, of course, the time he had two horses shot under him while he

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160 Tobias Lear, Washington in Domestic Life; edited by Richard Rush (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Company, 1857), pp. 65-69.

161 Stephenson and Dunn, op. cit., vol. II, pp. 304-305.

was fighting with Braddock and received four bullet holes in his coat. He must have been almost wholly oblivious to fear. Then there is the account of one of the pitched battles during the Revolutionary War when the British sought to draw the Continentals into a trap. The Americans, realizing their danger, were breaking ranks when Washington suddenly dashed out between them and the British. He rode a big white horse and the British were amazed. They fired point blank. Washington's aide turned his eyes away from the scene thinking surely the General must have been killed. But the smoke cleared, and there was Washington calling on the Continentals to stand firm. His personal courage turned the tide of battle.[162]

Washington's whole life illustrates his prudence. But there is another Christian virtue which is perhaps unusual in a man of his powers and attainments: humility.

During the Revolutionary War, Alexander Hamilton served as an aide-de-camp. He had an overpowering ego, and upon several occasions deliberately baited Washington. In one instance he kept the General needlessly waiting while he pretended to search for a lost paper. Washington finally exploded. "Colonel Hamilton," he said, "you have kept me waiting at the head of the stairs these ten minutes. I must

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[162] Stephenson and Dunn, op. cit., p. 388.

tell you, Sir, you treat me with disrespect." But later that day he expressed his desire to patch up the difference, stating that it wouldn't have happened but in a moment of passion. And he had these sentiments conveyed to Hamilton.[163]

We have seen, in the chapter on Providence, how Washington always gave God the credit for good fortune as it befell him, and the greater his triumphs, the greater became his spiritual humility.

Faith and hope were such an integral part of his character that, conservative and rich though he was, he did not hesitate a minute when his country called him to head a ragged army of Continentals that ran away from the British army until they licked it!

And as for love, in the sense of the word "charity," Washington in spite of his natural reticence in displaying his emotions either in his diary, or in his letters, nevertheless held his family and friends in genuine love and affection. It shows between the lines in his diary; for instance, on May 4, 1760, he writes, "Warm and fine. Set out for Frederick to see my negroes that lay ill of Small Pox. Took Church in my way to Coleman's where I arrived about sun setting."[164]

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163 Stephenson and Dunn, op. cit., vol. II, p. 158.

164 Washington, op. cit., vol. I, p. 157.

When Washington took leave of his officers on December 4, 1783, at Fraunces' Tavern, New York City, he took the hand of each one and embraced him, and "all those brave men were in tears."[165]

As for the other meaning of charity, "generosity," Washington was open-handed, though careful. He never turned down an old Revolutionary soldier, and even in his younger days he was always good for a loan to friends usually much better situated financially than he. As a single example of his open-handedness later in life: When George Washington Lafayette, son of the Marquis, came to the United States, he arrived at a most embarrassing time for Washington, who was then President, and who was trying to establish friendly relations with a French government which had no use for the elder Lafayette. Nevertheless, Washington directed that the "young man should be entered at Harvard, 'the expense of which, as also of every other means of support, I will pay.'"[166]

My own school, Washington and Lee University, benefitted by Washington's generosity when in 1789 he gave to what was then "Liberty Hall Academy" some James River Canal Stock, valued at $50,000.

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165 Stephenson and Dunn, op. cit., vol. II, p. 189.

166 Ibid., vol. II, pp. 427-428.

His secretary, Tobias Lear, has written of Washington:

> "He deals wisely with men in small things as in great; but he does no one injustice. When others are acting disingenuously towards him, though seeing through it, he is considerate and forebearing, not taking steps hastily, but ready to make allowances where they could be made....In dealings with small things he shows no undue tenacity of opinion; no selfishness; no petulance; no misplaced excitements. He never plays the petty tyrant. He does not forget himself; he does not forget others; he assumes nothing from any exaltation of himself, but is reasonable and provident in all his domestic and household arrangements....He stifled his dislikes; he was silent under sneers and disparaging innuendoes lest inopportune speech might work injury to the great cause intrusted to him." 167

In character, Washington was all that could be hoped for from a Christian. While possibly rejecting Christianity's theological presuppositions, he heartily embraced its moral precepts.

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167 Lear, op. cit., pp. 59-64.

IX

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S RELIGION

CHAPTER IX

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S RELIGION

Religion is something more, considerably more, than morality. So, while it would be easy to say that, judged from standards of conduct and moral rules, George Washington was a practicing Christian, and therefore a Christian in fact, this would not be a full statement of the case. I would be guilty of the same sort of half-truth that I have contended against in this thesis. I find myself regarding these claims that Washington was a thoroughgoing Christian as reading into his life what isn't there.

But we do have one divine in the history of our Church who, it seems to me, has written the unvarnished, the whole truth, as tactfully as he knew how. That man was the Rt. Rev. William White, next to Seabury, our first Bishop, and certainly in every respect the "first" Churchman in this country. And I propose to quote his letter on the subject of George Washington's religious beliefs and practices, in full, as the best statement I have read on this subject.

The letter was written at Philadelphia, November 28, 1832, and addressed to the Rev. B. C. C. Parker, rector,

at the time, of Trinity Church in Lennox, Massachusetts:

"Dear Sir:

I have received your letter of the 20th instant, and will furnish you with what information I possess on the subject of it.

"The father of our country, as well during the Revolutionary War as in his Presidency, attended divine service in Christ Church in this city (Philadelphia) except during one winter (1781-82), when, being here for the taking of measures with Congress towards the opening of the next campaign, he rented a house near St. Peter's Church, then in parochial union with Christ Church. During that season he attended regularly at St. Peter's. His behavior was always serious and attentive; but as your letter seems to intend an inquiry on the point of kneeling during the service, I owe it to truth to declare, that I never saw him in that attitude. During his Presidency our vestry provided him with a pew not ten yards in front of the desk. It was habitually occupied by himself, by Mrs. Washington, who was regularly a communicant, and by his secretaries.

"Although I was often in company with this great man, and had the honor of dining often at his table, I never heard anything from him which could manifest his opinions on the subject of religion. I knew no man who so carefully guarded against the discoursing of himself, or of his acts, or of anything that pertained to him; and it has occasionally occurred to me when in his company that, if a stranger to his person were present, he would never have known from anything said by the President that he was conscious of having distinguished himself in the eye of the world. His ordinary behavior, although exceptionally courteous, was not such as to encourage obtrusion on what he had in his mind.

"Within a few days of his leaving the Presidential chair our vestry waited on him with an address, prepared and delivered by me. In his answer he was pleased to express himself gratified by what he had heard from our pulpit; but there was nothing that committed him relatively to religious theory. Within a day or two of the above there was another address by many ministers of different persuasions, being prepared by Doctor Green and delivered by me. It has been a subject of opposite statements, owing to a passage in the posthumous works of Mr. Jefferson. He says (giving Doctor Rush for his

author, who is said to have it from Doctor Green), that the said address was intended to elicit the opinion of the President on the subject of the Christian religion. Doctor Green has denied this in his periodical work called 'The Christian Advocate,' and his statement is correct. Doctor Rush may have misunderstood Doctor Green, or the former may have been misunderstood by Mr. Jefferson; or the whole may have originated with some individual of the assembled ministers, who mistook his own conceptions for the sense of the body. The said two documents are in the Philadelphia newspapers of the time.

"On a thanksgiving day, appointed by the President for the suppression of the Western insurrection, I preached in his presence. The subject was the Connection between Religion and Civil Happiness. It was misrepresented in one of our newspapers. This induced the publishing of the sermon, with a dedication to the President, pointedly pleading his proclamation in favor of the connection affirmed. It did not appear that he disallowed the use made of his name. Although in my estimation, entire separation between Christianity and civil government would be a relinquishment of religion in the abstract; yet that this was the sentiment of the President, which may have been, I have no light positively to infer.

"There do not occur to me any other particulars meeting your inquiry, confined to my knowledge. Accordingly I conclude with writing myself, very respectfully, your humble servant.

--William White." [168]

The main points that stand out in Bishop White's letter are those to the effect that Washington was a fairly regular attendant at Christ's Church while he was President; that he was never observed (by White) to kneel; and that he (White) was never able to draw from him a statement on Christianity or his religious beliefs, nor, evidently, ever saw

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168 Sparks, op. cit., pp. 407-408.

him take communion.

Now Bishop White was an astute man. He was one of the most important and influential men in the country before, during, and after the Revolutionary War, and the most influential man in the Church. Naturally he would have been eager to have claimed Washington as a devout Christian and Episcopalian, had there been sufficient warrant for it. And the fact that he didn't, speaks more loudly than all the specious claims of Weems, Meade, Johnson, M'Guire, et al.

Meade writes: "He [Washington] may have communed on some occasion and yet not been seen by Bishop White, who had the care of two or three churches, at which he officiated alternately in conjunction with one or more ministers."[169]

Johnson says: "The fact Dr. White never saw Washington kneel is of little consequence. The testimony of other worshippers is that he did kneel. A minister seldom knows the posture of individuals in his congregation during prayer."[170]

(But when a man who measured six-feet-three, and was also the President of the United States, stood during prayer he could scarcely have missed being noticed--even if the good minister's eyes were turned heavenward!)

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169 Meade, op. cit., vol. II, p. 494.

170 Johnson, op. cit., p. 192.

Yet we have the testimony of Washington's own step-granddaughter, Miss Nelly Custis (quoted by Johnson himself) who in a letter of February 26, 1833, says, in part, of Washington's church attendance in New York and Philadelphia: "My grandmother, who was eminently pious, never deviated from her early habits. She always knelt. The General, as was then the custom, stood during the devotional parts of the service. On communion Sundays he left the church with me, after the blessing, and returned home, and we sent the carriage back for my grandmother."[171]

Either one accepts Miss Custis's testimony, or one may picture the President slipping off to church alone when neither Bishop White nor Miss Custis was present, there to kneel and take communion; which, of course, is absurd.

As for Jefferson's report of the Clergy's address to Washington seeking to elicit a statement on his religious beliefs, here is the passage:

> "When the Clergy addressed General Washington on his departure from Government, it was observed in their consultation, that he had never, on any occasion, said a word to the public which showed a belief in the Christian religion, and they thought they should so pen their addresses, as to force him at length to declare publicly whether he was a Christian or not. They did so. But....the old fox was too cunning for them. He answered every article of their address particularly except that, which he passed over without notice." 172

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171 Johnson, op. cit., pp. 243-244.

172 Ford, op. cit., p. 81.

Jefferson also observed: "Gouveneur Morris, who pretended to be in his [Washington's] secrets, and believed himself to be so, has often told me that General Washington believed no more of that system (Christian) than he himself did," and Morris, it is scarcely necessary to state, was an atheist."[173]

Lodge unconsciously demonstrated how easily it is to come to an impasse in analyzing George Washington's religion. He writes:

> "He [Washington] loved life and tasted of it deeply, but the courage which never forsook him made him ready to face the inevitable at any moment with an unruffled spirit. In this he was helped by his religious faith, which was as simple as it was profound. He had been brought up in the Protestant Episcopal Church, and to that Church he always adhered; for its splendid liturgy and stately forms appealed to him and satisfied him. He loves it, too, as the Church of his home and his childhood. Yet he was as far as possible from being sectarian, and there is not a word of his which shows anything but the most liberality and toleration. He made no parade of his religion, for in this, as in other things, he was perfectly simple and sincere. He was tortured by no doubts or questionings, but believed always in an over-ruling Providence and in a merciful God to whom he knelt and prayed in the day of darkness or in the hour of triumph with a supreme and childlike confidence." 174 (Italics supplied by present writer).

In other words Washington was both an Episcopalian and a non-sectarian. He loved the Church for aesthetic and sentimental reasons, but he would not subscribe to its theology.

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173 Ford, op. cit., p. 81.

174 Lodge, op. cit., vol. II, p. 387.

X

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

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Summary

Now, let's go back for a brief summary in order to add up Washington's religious beliefs; so that we may discover, if possible, just what he did believe.

In the first chapter we examined the testimony of various clergymen, and found it largely biased and unreliable. Parson Weems's picture of a priggish young Washington just isn't believable. Bishop Meade's claim that he was a regular church attendant doesn't hold up. William Johnson, we found, deals mainly in half-truths. So we are left with hardly any evidence from the clergy which is admissible. They said in effect, "George Washington certainly ought to have been a good Christian; therefore let's prove that he was." Thereupon they juggled the facts to fit their case. Bishop White is the only one among the clergy writing about Washington who stands out as impartial and seemingly reliable.

In Chapter II we examined Washington's background and learned that he was born to the planter aristocracy; that his mother and step-brother Lawrence were evidently re-

ligious; and that he had a pious home-life and certain religious duties fell early upon his shoulders. His first real religious awakening occurred when he counted the bullet holes in his coat after Braddock's defeat and decided God must have had a hand in his escape from death. We probed his church attendance record and found that while it improved after his marriage, it was none too good during his years at Mount Vernon before the Revolutionary War. We also discovered that he didn't hold the Sabbath in as high regard as he might have. And we found in him a close alliance between religion and politics. Washington was politically ambitious, in spite of his modesty about accepting leadership. He traveled the customary political route from militiaman, to vestryman, to burgess.

In the succeeding three chapters we explored various prominent elements which might have contributed to George Washington's religious thought.

The first, taken up in Chapter III, was the role played by the Anglican Church. In passing we learned that religion was at a low point in the country as a whole. A large per cent of the population were indifferent to it. Rationalism and Deism were making serious inroads upon the religious thought of the country, overturning Christian concepts. We found that the Revolutionary leaders such as Jefferson, Madison, Franklin, and Washington, belonged nom-

inally to the Anglican Church, and yet were at the same time classed as Deists. We saw that the Anglican Church in Virginia was in a weak state, with the clergy almost wholly dependent upon the Vestries for their livelihood, and apparently afraid to speak up. Only four or five had been inducted for life tenure. Their salaries fluctuated with the price of tobacco. (A fine position for clergymen!) We found that Washington attended church on only one feast day: Christmas. And we saw that the Church was what is known as "Low" in its ritual. There were no American bishops, and therefore no confirmations. The Church was not too popular with any class, and we found the aristocracy even taking measures against it. Washington was baptized, though never confirmed. And Washington quite evidently placed formal religion in one category and God in another, with scarcely any, if any, connection between them. We learned that church attendance appears to have been more of a duty with Washington than anything else, but that his relations with God seem to have been on a friendly and sincere basis.

We probed Deism in Chapter IV, and here a discrepancy appeared. Deism holds that "God is transcendent but not immanent; that God created the world, and then abandoned it, and that he takes little or no interest in his creation and cannot be reached by prayers. In practice this leads to atheism....for man cannot long continue to believe in a

God who does not love him and will not hear his prayer."[175]

This definition can hardly be applied to George Washington's religious beliefs, for George stood in very close relationship with God. He certainly did not believe that God had abandoned the world, for he has called Him "Supreme Dispenser of Events" and "Supreme Arbiter of the United States." To him God was very much immanent, and far from the Deist's transcendental God. God was watching over him and over the United States and He, God, shared Washington's convictions as to the absolute rightness of the American cause. Washington must have felt that the God he prayed to, heard his prayer, and answered it! Not a few times, but many, many times. One of the three foundation stones of Washington's religious belief was the "interposition" of God in human affairs.

However, we do know from Chapter IV that Washington did come into contact with Deism in several ways. For one, he was friendly with all of the Revolutionary leaders, many of whom have been called Deists and some of whom, as Franklin and Jefferson, seem to have been avowed Deists. Deism favored science and associated the growth of religion with it, an idea seemingly acceptable to Washington. Deism taught the brotherhood of man, to which Washington subscribed in thought if not always in practice. Then we learned that Washington possessed the books of Thomas Paine, Voltaire, Priestly, and

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[175] See above, p. 47.

Frederick the Great, which were frankly heretical to Christianity.

Through Masonry Washington had another contact with Deistic ideas, and Washington was a thoroughgoing Mason. We learned he was given a Masonic burial.

Thus we found Washington sitting fairly well astraddle three forms of religious expression: Anglicanism, Deism, and a sort of personal not exactly definable religion. We found him wholly impartial on sectarianism, and at times assuming a detached and almost patronizing attitude toward Christianity.

In Chapter V we studied George Washington's association with the Anglican or Established and later Episcopal Church. We found he was a vestryman both of Truro and Fairfax parishes, and was instrumental in re-building the Pohick Church. We saw him resign over the question of free pews and transfer to Christ Church in Alexandria where pews were still leased. We discovered him to be conscientious in his vestry duties, and got the idea that membership on the Vestry was as important from a political as from a religious standpoint. We found there was no valid evidence of his ever having knelt in church or having partaken of the Sacrament. In fact, taken publicly to task for quitting the service before Communion, he stayed away from church on Communion Sundays thenceforth. The impression develops that

the older he grew the more superficial became his attitude toward the Church and its services. However, in justice, he may have been reticent about taking Communion, since he was never confirmed. But neither was his wife confirmed, and she was a regular communicant.

Next, in Chapter VI we looked into worship in Washington's armies. We found him a strict disciplinarian, constantly ordering his troops to attend divine service. We found he frowned upon and spoke against swearing and drinking, and rebuked his men for religious intolerance. We found him asking for Chaplains to be attached to the Army. But through all his interest in religion for his men one is conscious of the idea that he used it as one means of holding them in line. Any kind of discipline was difficult among the raw Continentals at best, and the encouragement of good religious habits helped to control the men, to keep them ever mindful that they were fighting a sort of holy war, a war for the freedom of principle, a War which God favored. However, he was very thoughtful to render thanks unto God for each victory, and to remind the men that they were dependent upon God for future victories.

In Chapter VII we took up Washington's religious persuasions, paying special attention to his belief in a Special Providence. God, or the Great Architect, Washington seemed to feel, had taken him and the fledgling country

under His Almighty Wing. Both appeared to enjoy His special protection. (And certainly it is hard to argue with this on the basis of history.)

George Washington had a childlike faith in Providence as regarded the ordering of human events. The three fundamentals of his belief were: God, Divine Justice, and Providential interposition in human affairs.

We noticed that Washington used an amazing number of names for the Deity. And yet in none of them do we find any reference to God as eternal or indivisible. Nor do we find the other two Persons of the Godhead named. George Washington, of his own accord, never appears to have mentioned Christ or the Holy Spirit, nor to have made any allusion to the Trinity. (As for the so-called prayers of Washington, I think it is patent that the content is so unlike any of his other writings as neither to have been his, or to have influenced his religious views.)

Washington was not one of Christianity's protagonists. He was tolerant of it and at times even patronizing, but he never rose to its defense, though defending many of its moral practices.

On the subject of slavery we found that while Washington deplored it, he never quite rose to the occasion and put the weight of his prestige solidly behind a movement to abolish it; or ever, until his death, made any provision

for freeing his own slaves. Here his ideals were always subservient to his business judgment. And, I think it quite reasonable to conclude, that his stand on slavery weakened his moral judgment, encouraged a certain hypocrisy which became quite evident in his relation to the Episcopal Church.

In Chapter VIII we traced the cardinal and other Christian virtues through Washington's life and acts, and found that he measured up in all respects, save one (his stand on slavery) to the Christian ideal of moral life. He was temperate, just, prudent, courageous, and abounded in faith, hope, and charity or love. He had a temper, but it never gained the upper hand to the detriment of his character. His life reflected the moral principles of Christianity.

Conclusion

But, as we said before, Christianity is more than morals. It is a commitment to certain fundamental truths; viz., the divinity of Christ, the historical extension of his body in the Church, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the necessity of the Sacraments. And to none of these would George Washington give assent in his writings; so what else can we assume but that he did not accept them? It can hardly be argued from silence that he did.

On the other hand Washington with his belief in a

Special Providence, a God who looked lovingly upon the noble experiment burgeoning in the American Colonies, a God who had General Washington and his armies under his divine protection, this Washington could hardly be called a Deist. No more than you could call the old Hebrews Deists. Besides, Washington was never enough of an intellectual to have thoroughly understood or subscribed to the various propositions that Deism stood for.

Washington stood in a very close, a very personal relationship to God, in spite of the pompous titles he gave Him. Furthermore, he felt that God had a particular love for the Colonists, as if they were, in a measure, fighting His (God's) battles against the forces of evil. And here Washington and his religious ideas closely resemble the old Hebrews and their worship of Jahweh.

Many persons have called Washington a man of destiny. And a study of his life and writings reveals flashes of a story that is familiar to us of old, the story of a chosen leader and a chosen people fighting their way out of slavery into the freedom of the promised land.

Washington may not have been conscious himself of this similarity between his religious ideas and those of the old Israelites, but they are apparent to the student. And this affords a much more plausible explanation of his relig-

A whole thesis might be built around this idea. I considered it myself. But there one would be looking for something specific and everything might be read in the light of the hope of finding it, and so become falsely colored.

I do not say irrevocably that Washington's religion was that of the Old Testament and not Deistic. I merely say that it was not markedly Deistic, and not unlike that of the ancient Hebrews.

But there is one more factor to be considered. And that is mysticism. The question occurred to me early in the study; was Washington a mystic without realizing it? And as I probed his thoughts and words, the conviction grew that it is entirely possible that he was.

Now the first mark of a mystic, and perhaps the one thing which all mystics share in common, is the "sense of presence." The sense of a Divine Presence, I should say. St. Paul had it. St. Francis had it. St. Theresa was never without it. St. Ignatius Loyola had it. And, it seems to me, so did George Washington.

George Washington may have made a few errors of judgment, but at the right points of his life he made the right decisions. And he was ever conscious of a guiding hand at these moments. Afterwards he was quick to acknowledge divine help. It was as if he were ever in the presence of this higher power, and were able to call upon it when he

needed to do so. And, say what you will, it has been our good fortune that this was true. A less essentially religious man might have made all the wrong decisions, with goodness knows what results.

If it can be said that God in times of old raised up heroes to deliver His chosen people from the hand of the oppressors, the history of the American Revolution and the facts of George Washington's life certainly leave one with a strong feeling that God has been similarly at work again.

In view of the evidence presented, it seems reasonable to conclude that George Washington was not a Christian, nor yet a Deist, but that his religion more closely resembles that of the Old Testament Hebrews plus a certain happy admixture of mysticism and the moral principles of Christianity.

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